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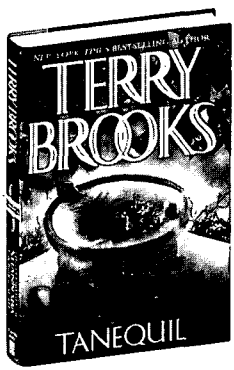

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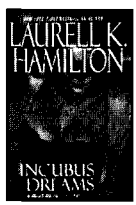

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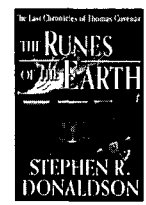

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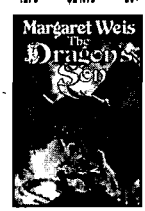

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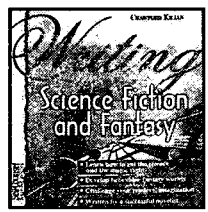

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THE MAGAZINE OF

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NOVELETS

THE LORELEI 7 **Alex Irvine**

KEYBOARD PRACTICE, CONSISTING OF AN ARIA WITH DIVERSE VARIATIONS FOR THE HARPSICHORD WITH TWO MANUALS 44 **John G. McDaid**

THE BLEMMYE'S STRATEGEM 97 **Bruce Sterling**

LAST MAN STANDING 135 **Esther M. Friesner**

SHORT STORIES

BORN BAD 92 **Arthur Porges**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 31 **Charles de Lint**

BOOKS 36 **Elizabeth Hand**

PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS: ET IN ARCADIA SUPEREGO 94 **Paul Di Filippo**

FILMS: BLADE RUNNER HAD A BABY 130 **Lucius Shepard**

COMING ATTRACTIONS 158

INDEX TO VOLUMES 106 & 107 159

CURIOSITIES 162 **Roberto de Sousa Causo**

CARTOONS: Danny Shanahan (30), Arthur Masear (93).
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Alex Irvine's novels include One King, One Soldier *(reviewed in this issue) and* A Scattering of Jades. *He has gotten to be one of our most popular contributors in recent years, and his latest story will likely add to his reputation. "The Lorelei" takes us back to the turn of the last century, to the art scene in New York, for the story of a young man with more talent than direction. (Readers who find this story interesting might want to read Jeffrey Ford's novel* The Portrait of Mrs. Charbuque, *which also explores the* fin-de-siècle *New York art scene.)*

The Lorelei

By Alex Irvine

THE LORELEI IS GONE NOW. Where she stood is now a bare promontory of stone, overlooking the Rhine under a moon whose light hides more than it illuminates. Where once I saw her, languid and deadly, trailing an arm in the shallows, there is now a stunted bush struggling to cast a shadow. Another time Ryder painted her behind a gaunt and broken oak, peering down at a lone fisherman. The fisherman's net dangled forgotten in his hands, and he gazed enraptured at her while the boat drifted toward the rocks that would be his death. But Ryder, knowing he was the fisherman, nearly always painted the Lorelei alone.

I knew Albert Pinkham-Ryder for twenty-one years, long enough that I can tell you the story of the Lorelei from the beginning. I do not know where it ends.

When the acid in my stomach keeps me awake, I leave Martha sleeping and go upstairs, to watch the moon mark the passage of the night. On these nights I think of Ryder, and when I think of Ryder my remembrances gather the Lorelei up from that part of my soul that was once

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romantic, once able and yearning to believe in an invisible world not our own. Often daybreak, and the sounds of my dear Martha rising, letting the dog into the yard, making breakfast — all of this draws me back into the present, this abominable, apocalyptic year of 1943 in which I am a poor man who once was wealthy, a man of seventy who once was young. It is all because of Ryder, because his unflagging pursuit of art drew me into its wake, and because I failed to meet the example he set.

My name is Charles Pelletier. I came to New York from Bangor, Maine, in 1896, with a degree from the Maine State Teacher's College folded in the briefcase my uncle Philip had presented to me as a graduation gift. Both of my parents passed away when I was young, leaving Uncle Philip as my sole benefactor; it was my good fortune that he owned three sawmills in Millinocket and Old Town, so my schooling was a burden he assumed willingly and with ease. My desire for a career in New York was less palatable to him, but he himself had abandoned the place of his birth when he came to Bangor from Wolfville, Nova Scotia, so perhaps he attributed my wanderlust to an inherited family trait. In any event, he questioned me sharply, ascertained the strength of my commitment, and at last agreed to furnish me with a small allowance during my first year in the city. At the end of that period, it was understood, I was either to stand on my own two legs or return to Bangor, where I would take up a place in Uncle Philip's business.

My real reason for wanting to come to New York, of course, was to paint. I would put my degree to good use only until the income from my art enabled me to free myself of Uncle Philip's largess — and from the onerous life of the grammar-school teacher. In the city I intended to meet Homer and Eakin and Chase Whistler and everyone else I could find, to learn from them and put their acquaintance to good use. Commissions too cheap or jejune for those established figures would, I imagined, begin to come my way once I had demonstrated my ability; and I felt certain that I would more than match up to the task.

On April the seventeenth, I stepped off a train and was swept away in the mad crosscurrents of Manhattan. I found lodging in a rooming house near Washington Square, on Macdougal Street; my single room had large windows facing south, and before I'd even eaten a meal in the city I

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purchased a new easel and several canvases from an artists' supply house on Eighth Street. Walking through the park with my goods, I felt firmly at home in a way that is only possible when you find yourself actually doing something that for years has been the material of dream. Two boys played with a dog; couples walked slowly around the fountain; the afternoon sunlight caught the steel frame of a water tank over a row of buildings on Fourth Street.

I noticed the old man slouched before an easel scant seconds before he spoke to me. "Are you a student, there?"

I stopped and set my roll of canvases on the stones of the path. "No sir," I said. "I intend to be an artist."

"So you're a student," he said, and scratched at his wild beard. His fingers left streaks of yellow and red in the gray. With the same hand he gestured at his easel. "You can take this as your first lesson if you like."

Stifling an arch remark, I stepped around him to look, and saw that his subject was the same line of rooftops over which I had remarked the water tank. The tank shone like a lighthouse beacon, gathering the scene to itself and casting carriages and passersby in the colors that stained the artist's whiskers. The effect was of such violent energy that I was physically shaken; I had never painted anything remotely like it, had no idea in fact that the artist's brush could transform paint into fire too bright to look at. I thought of my own canvases, carefully rolled and stored in Uncle Philip's attic. Once I had slept outside on the shores of Chimney Pond so that I could capture Mount Katahdin at dawn; but my dawn was the pinched wick of a candle next to the incandescence I now beheld. My first lesson indeed.

"Marvelous," I said, though I wasn't sure I liked what he had done. It was too much, perhaps, an excess of color, overdone as a drawing-room sonnet — but so compelling! I looked a while longer, and my teacher took up his brush and went back to work. Shadows grew, and the sky took on the pallor recognizable to any man who has ever seen a smokestack. At some point I stopped observing and began analyzing, and just as I became conscious of the change the old man put down his brush and said, "You've seen enough for one day."

Startled, I wondered how long I had stood watching him. "Would you mind if I came to see you again?"

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He turned to look at me from beneath the brows of an Old Testament prophet. "You can come back when you have something to show me," he said, and went back to his work.

The evening and the night passed without my notice. I was consumed, living only for the rising of the sun so that I might take up my brushes and fling myself into the creation of light. In the morning my trunks arrived from Bangor, but instead of furnishing my room I left them where the teamsters set them down and went back to painting. It all seems impossibly naïve and romantic now, this violent awakening, but if it had not been that old man in the park it would have been someone else. I had come to New York as a disciple looking for a master, and like a baby bird I took the first painter I saw for that master.

For weeks I rose with the dawn to paint the line of Lower Manhattan rooftops I saw out my window. Uncle Philip's money went straight into oils and turpentine and canvas, and enough food to keep me going. Before I knew it I'd been in New York for a month, and seventeen canvases of my room's southward prospect curled in the corner, unmounted. It was time to go back to the park. I had something to show.

On a rainy morning, freed by weather from my compulsion, I selected the best of my work and spent the day carefully reworking it. Then I left it on the easel and slept. The next morning, buoyant, I went downstairs and out into the street. I bought a bottle of wine and a cheese from a store on Thompson Street, and since the rain had cleared by then I took a turn through the park in hopes of seeing my accidental master.

He was not there, and for the first time it occurred to me that he might not return. Perhaps he typically painted elsewhere, and had come to Washington Square on a whim. In all likelihood he had forgotten our brief conversation; it was even possible that his brusque dismissal had been intended to ensure that I never bothered him again.

My optimism curdled as quickly as it had appeared. I went home despondent, crashing back to Earth after my month-long fury of optimistic ambition. The bottle of wine I'd meant to share went instead entirely down my own throat, and when it was gone I stormed out into the windy night and walked, neither knowing nor caring where I went. After some time I found myself in Battery Park. The late-spring wind growled up from

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the Verrazano Narrows, cutting through my inebriation as well as my thin coat. I turned up my collar and walked more slowly, acutely aware of my vulnerability to any one of New York's legion of robbers. I could imagine the exasperation and disappointment on Uncle Philip's face when he heard that his nephew had been beaten and robbed while wandering drunk along the Manhattan docks. No doubt he would terminate my allowance and demand that I come home. It was even possible that he would come to New York to fetch me, letting me baste in his disapproval as he surveyed the chaos of my room and hired men packed my possessions for their return to Bangor. My canvases would dry and crack in Uncle Philip's attic, and one day he would dispose of them without telling me. As an old man I would recall my month in New York with embarrassment, perhaps even shame; I would realize that men such as myself were meant for safe careers close to home. I was no adventurer, nor fortune seeker. Nor artist.

A piece of paper blew flapping past me and out over the water. Roused from my self-pity, I looked upwind and saw a figure slouched on a bench facing the tip of the island. He appeared to be writing, but he made no move to chase after the sheet that had escaped him. I looked after it, but it was gone into the darkness; doubtless the Hudson had by now claimed it, and its words were now bleeding into the dark water.

I took a few steps in his direction. When he did not look up, I regarded him more carefully, debating whether to approach him. Perhaps he did not know he had lost part of whatever he was writing — and how could he see to write in the lampless night, lit only by the stars and a waning sliver of moon?

Just then he lifted his hand and a second sheet of paper fluttered from his lap. It caught briefly on the arm of the next bench, then tumbled out of sight after its predecessor.

"I don't know many writers," I said, "but surely most of them don't put their work to so sudden an end."

He laughed, and then looked at me. Now that I was closer to him, I could see that his hat and coat were tattered, his dark beard unkempt. One of his shoes was untied, and the skin of his leg showed palely through a hole at the knee of his trousers.

"Ha," he said. "More of them should."

"What is it you're writing there?"

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"Poems."

Dressed like a vagabond, writing poems and feeding them to the waters, he seemed a mystical figure, a character from a fantastical story whose inexplicable actions hid a kind of wisdom. I was drawn to him.

"Why throw them away?"

"Because they're terrible. Nobody has ever written poems this bad. Fish are all the audience they deserve."

His candor emboldened me. "If they're so bad, why do you keep writing them?"

He gave an exasperated snort. "You don't know much about it, do you? If you have to write poems, you write poems whether they're good or bad. Once in a while I write a good one. And I'm not a poet. I'm a painter."

Of course, was my first thought. Every strange bearded man I speak to in this city is a painter. Alcohol and frustration opened my mouth again and I said, "I hope you treat your paintings better than your poems."

This seemed to make him angry. "I treat them as well as they deserve."

"Beg pardon," I said. "I'm new to the city. I didn't mean to offend."

"Too many people complain about how I treat my paintings," he said, and began to scribble another poem. After a few lines he let it go, and it rose away.

"I'm an artist," I said. "Or rather, I mean to be."

"Have you any talent?"

"Yes, I do," I said, though I wasn't sure.

He stood and flung his remaining papers to the wind. "All right then," he said. "Let's go see."

This was very likely the last thing in the world I had expected him to say. For a moment I couldn't respond.

"Well?" he prodded. "Are you an artist or aren't you?"

"What's your name?" I asked him, to avoid answering his question.

"What's it matter? If I was Rembrandt or Titian, would that make your decision for you?"

"No," I said. "I'll show you. But I'd like to know your name."

"Pinkie," he said, and as an afterthought extended his hand.

* * *

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And that was how I met Albert Pinkham Ryder, though I had never heard his name at the time. The art classes I had taken in Bangor, from a sulfurous Scot named Craig MacTavish, had focused on the traditional; to him Turner was a wild-eyed savage and American art not worth mentioning. I had seen Homer, Eakin, and Bierstadt, and some of the other Americans one could see at exhibits in Boston — or, rarely, Portland — but of the living art circle in New York I knew next to nothing. I had come to the city out of some vague feeling of dissatisfaction with my teaching, and a nebulous conviction that I wanted something I would never get from MacTavish or the conservative curators of New England museums. My chance encounter in Washington Square Park, wrenching as it was, had felt like a validation of those hopes; and when in the grip of pessimism I stumbled across Ryder, again I felt as if leaving Maine had been the right thing to do.

But that came later. The night I met Ryder — or I should say, the night a purported artist calling himself Pinkie invited himself to my room to look at my work — I felt only that his very oddness made him worth cultivating. If that sounds strange, recall that I was twenty-three years old, drunk, and yearning after some reason to avoid taking a job teaching children things they didn't want to know.

We walked north in silence. I tried a few conversational sallies, but they blew away on the wind like one of Pinkie's stillborn poems. When we got to my front door, he nodded and said, "The right place, anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"This part of the city is crawling with people who call themselves artists. Some of them actually are."

"Do you live nearby?"

Pinkie hesitated. "In Chelsea. Eighteenth Street."

I didn't press him. We entered my room and he went directly to the canvas I'd left to dry that afternoon. For a long time he stood looking, and I exerted all my energy not to interrupt him.

At last he turned away and looked at me. "Keep at it," he said, and walked past me to the door. I watched him go, paralyzed by conflicting impulses: to thank him, ask him to elaborate, suggest we meet for a meal or so I could see his own work. In the end I did none of those things, and when his footsteps had faded down the stairs I mechanically closed the

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door, undressed, and sat on my bed looking at my best canvas by the light of a lamp that soon dimmed and went out.

AS DID I. When I woke up the next day, it was past noon. The sight of easel and canvas exhausted me. I set about cleaning and putting my things in order, and when night fell my room looked like the abode of a civilized man. I took the satisfaction of this work with me on a long nocturnal walk up to Madison Square and back down through the streets of Chelsea. I hesitated when I crossed Eighteenth Street, wondering if I might turn down it and encounter Pinkie again, but thinking about it I realized that he might have been an impostor, no artist at all, just a tattered insomniac willing to pander to a young stranger's enthusiasm. The thing to do was find out.

Over the next weeks I began to discover the city's galleries and museums, mostly (I admit this with some chagrin, but later it will become clear that I was directed by an intrinsic trait of my character) to eavesdrop on conversations about who was meeting where, and in this way I gathered information about where New York's artists took their leisure. Pinkie had said that Washington Square harbored numbers of artists, but Greenwich Village had enough taverns and restaurants that I might drain Uncle Philip's allowance before ever finding the salon I was certain must be there.

Fear of embarrassment kept me from making more direct inquiries. My experience thus far of artists in New York had been enough to encourage me, and I still spent most clear mornings putting the light through my window to the best use I knew. My encounter with Pinkie, though, had spent my reservoir of boldness; I couldn't imagine asking someone whose work I'd seen hung at the Art Students League to come and see whatever I was currently daubing on Macdougal Street.

Also I spent quite a bit of time considering whether to obtain legitimate employment. Uncle Philip wrote frequently to ask how I was getting along, and I answered regularly, suggesting that I was still learning the lay of the land. It went without saying — or so I implied in my letters — that I would soon be settled in a teaching position.

Apparently my vagueness dissatisfied Uncle Philip, for one day in

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November a letter arrived from him enclosing a note of introduction to the headmaster of a private boys' school on Thirty-third Street. It seemed that Uncle Philip had contracted the building of a summer home for this man, a Doctor Philbrick, in Kennebunk, and Doctor Philbrick had suggested that Uncle Philip's promising nephew might be glad of an interview. *It is quite a prestigious institution,* wrote Uncle Philip, *one with which you would be proud to associate.*

This was a conundrum. If I failed to pursue this doubtless fortunate opportunity, Uncle Philip might well be angered to the point of revoking his support. If, on the other hand, I took up teaching, I would spend my mornings initiating the scions of Manhattan's merchant class into the mysteries of Shakespeare and the pluperfect — instead of painting.

As had quickly become my habit, I took a walk to clear my head and consider the problem. With the benefit of hindsight I have no doubt that I made my way intentionally to Eighteenth Street, but at the time I found myself on the corner of Sixth Avenue as if I had fallen there from the sky. And there, shambling away from me with a loaf of bread protruding from the pocket of his coat, was Pinkie.

I hurried after him, calling as he turned into a doorway and fumbled for a key.

He looked up and frowned, his gaze darting as if he suspected I was part of a gang. "Who are you?"

"We met in Battery Park," I said, trying to catch my breath. "You were writing poems and — " I flung my arm out in imitation of his gestures that night.

"Ah," he said. "Still imitating?"

"Imitating?" I said dumbly. "Imitating who?"

"Your sun," Pinkie said. He inserted his key in the lock. "What good is the form and color of a sun if it doesn't burn you?"

I could form no response. Hadn't he encouraged me? Had I misremembered our entire interaction?

"You're still painting what you see. Imitation. Paint instead what you feel about what you see."

"I am," I said. "I do."

One corner of his mouth quirked. "I doubt," he said, and gestured for me to follow him as he shouldered the door open.

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A lamp was burning in his room as we entered, and I marveled at his carelessness. I would no more leave a flame when I left my room than I would strike a match to my paintings myself; indeed, I have more often considered the latter than the former. That pedestrian surprise, though, was soon washed away by what I can only call awe at the squalid chaos of Pinkie's studio. Canvases lay everywhere: leaning against walls, stacked atop one another, half-buried by heaps of rubbish. A small clear space on the floor provided an approach to his easel, and on a small table next to it clustered tubes of paint, buckets of varnish and turpentine, brushes piled like fallen sticks, even candles whose melt spilled over the table's edges to spot the floor. The odors of all these things, in addition to the indelicate aroma emanating from Pinkie himself, overwhelmed my senses, but even through the involuntary tears that blurred my vision I could see enough to be staggered by the power of his work.

No one who has seen Ryder's paintings since his death can have any idea of their impact. His pursuit of particular effects was absolute and in the end self-annihilating; to achieve his wondrous lusters, his inhuman colors, he piled paint upon varnish upon wax upon paint upon whatever else he thought might bring to life his singular vision. While these canvases lived, there was nothing like them in the world. Even now, when he is twenty years in the grave, Ryder's work is a gate it does not do to approach too closely. This may sound melodramatic — but I have not yet spoken of the Lorelei.

"I went to Europe a few years ago, four or five," Pinkie said. "Twice, now that I think about it. Something seized me there. I paint differently now."

The canvas I beheld on his easel was dominated by a fierce sweep of yellow-green light, arcing from the top left of the frame across and down to the bottom right corner, where it hung on the fingertips of a stooped, almost a Blakean, figure straddling the uppermost crag of a mountain. The rock seemed real enough to sweat, and the tiny female figure bathed in the great demigod's light was obscure and faceless and compelling as the beloved of a dreamer. No art is well described in words, and I have done poor justice to this work of Ryder's, but let it be entered in my defense that

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Ryder's art is utterly incommensurable with written language where the work of most his peers is merely difficult to talk about. Certainly he could not talk about it without resorting to gnomic aphorism.

"Who is she?" I breathed.

Ryder shrugged. "These fantastical scenes, they capture me now. I feel sometimes as if I've been noticed, as if a slow eternal gaze has fallen upon me, and having brought me into focus has surrounded me with a world of magic and danger and...." He trailed off, grew a little sheepish; licked his thumb and rubbed at one of the mountains in the background. "Feel like I'm getting close to something, or something's getting close to me," he mumbled. Licked and rubbed again. "Well. Hm." Just like that Pinkie forgot I was there, swept away by some interaction of his saliva with whatever he had slathered on the canvas earlier in the day. I looked away from him, was equally overwhelmed by everything else I saw, and foundered. I struggled to find words.

The sound of a young woman's voice drifted in through the open door. I tore my eyes from the canvases arrayed—well, scattered—around the room and looked at Pinkie, only to see that he looked every bit as stunned and overwhelmed as I felt. A question flashed through my mind: How could he bear it? How could he bear to feel this way every day? Surely it would destroy a man to experience such a consuming passion every moment he stood before his easel; and was it this that drove him down to Battery Park in the darkest hours, to create things for which he cared nothing and fling them away on the unlettered winds?

This reaction surely betrays the fact that although I might have been a painter—and a successful one, in a certain way—I was never an artist in the way that Ryder was. My own work never moved me except insofar as it hinted that I had absorbed some of the reflected brilliance of my betters.

And in any case, I had completely misapprehended the source of Ryder's rapture.

He opened his mouth and paused as if he had forgotten what he meant to say. Then, softly, he said, "Has ever man heard a more beautiful sound?" And rushed from the room.

I followed him down the hall, and caught up to him as he knocked heavily on the last door before the stair. His body trembled before it as

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before an altar, and when it opened Pinkie knelt and said, "Was it you who sang to me?"

A young woman, ordinary in face and dress, her sleeves rolled to the elbows, stood in the doorway. "I beg your pardon, sir?" she said. Looking from Pinkie to me, she frowned.

"Your song," he begged. "I heard your song."

"Aye, sir, I did sing," she said. Again her gaze flicked to me as if I might interfere—or, alternatively, explain; but I could do neither.

"It was a song to save a man's soul," Pinkie said. "I cannot be without it. Without you. Will you be my wife?"

Plain shock smoothed the lines on the girl's face. "Who are you?"

"I am he for whom you sang," said Pinkie. "When we are married, I will paint your voice. Please." His hand disappeared into his coat pocket, and he spilled a handful of papers onto the floor by his knees. Bank drafts, a dozen or more, some of them for sums greater than Uncle Philip had proposed as my year's funding. Who was this man, that he lived in squalor, crumpled his commissions in a pocket, and proposed to marry a washerwoman half his age for a verse of song?

The girl's eyes widened at the sight of the drafts scattered on the grimy wooden floor. I could see her performing the calculus every poor unmarried woman has worked through a thousand times, and coming to the expected solution.

"Mister Albert Ryder," she said, "I will be your wife."

He closed his eyes and reeled back. "What is your name?"

"Frances Mulrooney."

Pinkie—Albert Pinkham Ryder—stood and took her hand. He bent to kiss it, courtly as a duke, then straightened again. "Frances, I will return tomorrow. Think of me tonight, as I will think of nothing but you."

"Good night, Mr. Ryder," said Frances, and shut the door.

I wondered where her mother and father were, and what they would say when she announced her betrothal to the eccentric artist down the hall. Their astonishment would turn to speculation when she described the handful of uncashed checks I was even then rushing to collect, as Pinkie stood and walked entranced back toward his room. The drafts in hand, I was about to call out to him when another voice preempted my own.

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"Pinkie! Come to dinner!"

The speaker was a hale and mustachioed man midway in age between Ryder and myself. He strode around the railing at the top of the stairs and past me to follow Ryder into his room. I trailed after, and entered Pinkie's studio in time to hear him say, "Stanley, I have met my life's companion tonight, my muse and helpmeet. We will be married tomorrow."

"Good God," said Stanley. "Who?"

Pinkie was rummaging through the heaps of abandoned paintings, flinging aside whatever junk came to hand. "A nightingale, an angel, at the end of the hall. I had never known she was there, and today—just now—I heard her sing. I cannot be without her. She is all that matters now." He banged into the pot of stew bubbling on coals in the middle of the floor. Brown sludge lapped over the edge. For a dazed moment I envisioned him dipping a finger in it and then smearing it carefully onto one of his canvases, where the browns weren't quite viscid and runny enough.

Stanley turned to me. He noted that I held in my left hand a large number of bank drafts. "Don't tell me he gave you those."

"No, he offered them to the girl," I answered. "I picked them up when he walked away."

He extended a hand and I gave him the checks. He set them on a bureau near the door, but made no move to clean up the spilled stew. "She didn't take them?"

I shook my head.

"So she rejected his proposal."

"No, she accepted it all right. But she left the checks where they were."

This clearly disturbed Stanley. "Who is she?"

"A girl. Frances something. Mulrooney. Dressed like a domestic. She was singing some kind of ballad, and when Pinkie heard it he rushed off like she was a mermaid."

Stanley turned to Ryder. "Pinkie, this is absurd."

Ryder ignored him. He'd found the canvas he was looking for and now he dipped a dirty rag in a bucket of dirtier water and ran the cloth across its surface. I couldn't help but wince; Stanley's lack of reaction indicated he'd seen it all before.

"For years I've felt her getting closer," Pinkie murmured. He looked

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at me. "Wasn't I just telling you that, Charles? Now at last I see her."

His fingers trailed across the canvas as he set the easel's previous occupant against the wall and put this new one in its place. I looked more closely at it, and felt an odd twinge at the memory of Pinkie saying *Feel like I'm getting close to something, or something's getting close to me,* for here on this canvas was the same crag of rock, this time looming over a forbidding valley. In the sky at center, the life of a pale moon bled out into thin clouds; below, a curve of river, and in the bottom right corner a man in a boat, indistinct, outlined and hinted at. Perhaps because of Pinkie's words and the moment, the image seemed to me fraught with expectation and longing, emptiness deepened by false hope.

But now I am confusing experience and memory. In truth, the canvas was scarcely more than a sketch, crude lines and savage angles, bleak and muted colors. Still Pinkie caressed it as if he might draw something from it to explain his behavior—and still, I tell you, the composition was the same.

"Pinkie," Stanley said sharply. "You can't marry a girl you've never met just because you heard her singing down the hall."

"Who never loved, that loved not at first sight?" Pinkie quoted.

"For God's sake. We're not talking about first sight, are we? Shakespeare never said anything about first sound. And even if he had, this isn't a play, and Romeo and Juliet ended up dead."

"Go away, Stanley," Pinkie grunted. He still hadn't taken his eyes from the sketch.

"I am, next week. Remember? London? Might be a good idea if you came with us."

"Tomorrow I will marry her."

Stanley turned to me. "Apologies for my discourtesy. Stanley Terrell."

"Charles Pelletier." We shook hands. When Stanley said something in French, I added, "From Maine."

His smile was mostly devoid of malice. "And how do you know Pinkie, Charles?"

"I'm new to the city. I met him in Battery Park and he came to my room to look at my paintings."

Stanley's left eyebrow raised a practiced half-inch. "You're a painter as well. Do you know Ryder's work?"

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Again I felt a little unsteady, as the recent memory of walking into this room flooded over me. "Just today," I said. "It's extraordinary."

"It is that. But if I may be permitted another borrowing from the Bard, Pinkie is a bit of a stranger in the world. We — his friends — occasionally have to look after him, and this is one of those occasions. I hope I won't offend you if I suggest that he and I need to address this issue in private."

"No," I said. "I understand perfectly." And I did, though I could barely stand the excitement and curiosity the previous half hour had aroused and I wanted nothing more than to be in on whatever happened next. It was the stuff of legend, the artist saved from himself by the intervention of friends, and I was witnessing it firsthand. It was very hard to nod and take Stanley Terrell's card as he shut Pinkie's door in my face, leaving me alone and exhilarated by proximity to the man who is still the only genius I have ever known.

PINKIE'S FRIENDS DID take him abroad for a little while, and when they returned there was no more talk of marriage. The girl moved out and disappeared, and Pinkie, as long as I knew him, never spoke directly of her again.

Which is not to say that he never spoke of her. The unfinished canvas he'd excavated from the wreckage of his studio that day became his voice for her. I am sure of it. I am sure, too, that when he said he had felt her coming closer to him he was right. Too many things are otherwise inexplicable.

The first of these is his sudden engrossment in a strange poem of Heine's that Stanley Terrell later (years later, when Pinkie was dead and Terrell and I had come to an understanding) told me Pinkie had heard for the first time on that London trip.

Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten
Daß ich so traurig bin;
Ein Märchen aus alten Zeiten,
Das kommt mir nicht aus dem Sinn.

I know not why it should be that I am so unsettled; a fable from olden days will not leave my mind. How many sleepless nights I have passed

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with these lines rolling through my mind, wondering if what I know to be true is in fact the truth. Ryder's art was always about the pursuit of the unknowable, the unreachable; and knowing him, I came too close to things I myself should never have known and could never reach. This doomed us both, and in different ways we each chose this fate.

I remember an argument among two portraitists (we were all portraitists, but these two had settled into it and did little else) about the correct translation of *traurig*. *Distressed*, claimed the first, but the other argued that was too faint, that there was a power of sadness in the German which the word distressed failed to capture. "I mean, really," he said. "Distressed? Losing your hair?" *Unmanned* was that party's preference, and then the conversation grew vulgar and comical. Where this dispute took place I do not recall, nor the names of those involved — the only other recollection I have of the evening is of Ryder himself, watching the exchange but not participating, a smile of what might have been condescension playing at his lips. He knew something they did not, and they did not know the difference: this was one thing that marked him as an artist while they painted portraits.

As did I. My part in the story is yet to come.

Apart from moments like that one, Ryder betrayed no sign that he longed for the girl at the end of the hall. The only reason I knew is that he took me into an oblique confidence over the next years, as he painted and repainted the Lorelei. It had begun as a commission from a businessman who collected contemporary Americans and wanted to add Ryder to his Blakelock and Homer; when I first saw it he had been working on it for some time. Years. This was not unusual. Ryder often worked on a single painting for years, and more than once his exasperated buyer would suggest having his funeral procession stop by Ryder's studio — to which Ryder unfailingly replied, *If it is ready*.

The Lorelei, though. She occupied him from sometime in the early Nineties until his death in 1917. The canvas grew gnarled and ridged from coats of paint and layers of whatever else he worked into it as he sought the woman whom he could never have.

Periodically Ryder would appear in my doorway and invite me to his studio, where he would either groan or exult over the progress he'd made on the Lorelei. By this time I had abandoned the pursuit of teaching — my

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skill with oils meant that I could make a careful living as a portraitist and painter of opulent homes. Occasionally my work appeared in the corners of New York's smaller galleries, but I attained neither fame nor notoriety, and certainly not wealth. Two of the three came later, and not together.

I could never visit Pinkie without the feeling that he was trying to tell me something. He hovered at the edge of my field of vision, and it seemed at times that my presence brought other lines from Heine's poem to his lips.

It's often been remarked that Ryder did little new after the 1890s, spending his time dithering over commissions and reworking canvases from earlier parts of his career. This is true. The Lorelei had claimed him by then.

It would be years before she claimed me, and then only because Ryder gave her the strength. In the interim, events conspired to test me, and enough time has now passed that I can admit I failed the test utterly.

In the spring of 1897, Uncle Philip discontinued his support and demanded that I return to Bangor. I had expected this since my failure to pursue the teaching opportunity he had created for me, but it was nevertheless unsettling. For perhaps the last time in my life I demonstrated a backbone, and refused my uncle's order. He wrote me a curt letter, and I rededicated myself to making a life for myself in New York City. It cost me quite a bit of pride, but I made inquiries among the circle of artists and patrons who orbited Pinkie's studio, and eventually I was able to eke out a subsistence livelihood painting portraits and landscapes. My talent was unexceptional, but I can claim for myself a certain competency, and later I was to discover unexpected reservoirs within myself. Or perhaps I should say that the Lorelei made me aware of them. Or bestowed them upon me.

Die Luft is kühl und es dunkelt,
Und ruhig fließt der Rhein;
Der Gipfel des Berges funkelt
Im Abensonnenschein.

The air is cool and it's getting dark, and the Rhine flows quietly; the mountains glow with the evening sun. A loose translation, but it will do.

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Ryder's *Lorelei* is also a loose translation, especially since the nymph herself has vanished from it.

Die schönste Jungfrau sitzet
Door oben wunderbar,
Ihr goldenes Geschmeide blitzet,
Sie kämmt ihr goldnes Haar.

Sie kämmt es mit goldenem Kamme
Und singt ein Lied dabei;
Das hat eine wundersame,
Gewaltige Melodei.

No wonder Ryder responded so powerfully to these lines. *The most beautiful girl sits over there, wondrous, showing her golden treasure, combing her golden hair.* The Jungfrau is a mountain and a woman, and her golden hair is at the same time the sunset on the peak. Ryder's landscapes were always alive, always so much more important than whatever human figures inhabited them — and after his death, his Lorelei faded into the mountain overlooking the Rhine. *She combs with a golden comb, and sings a song meanwhile, that has a strange, powerful melody.*

This poem! When I should be painting, I find myself reciting its lines under my breath, in German even though I know not a word of that language save enough to parrot Heine's lines. The first time I remember doing so was sometime in 1907, I think. Ryder's health was already beginning to fail; his kidneys gave him terrible trouble, and the strange aura of wise naïveté that once accompanied him faded. During the last ten years of his life he was almost literally a shadow of his younger self — a shabby, unwashed, ill recluse who painted and painted but finished almost nothing. My financial health paralleled his physical decline. After the turn of the century, my small niche in the New York art market grew even smaller, until I was faced with losing the room I had by that time inhabited for nearly twelve years. I was thirty-five years old, with no prospects, relying on a circle of more successful acquaintances to keep me in bread and paint. The shame of this time in my life

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has never quite left me, although my most shameful behavior was still to come.

I will avoid it no longer. On a fall evening in 1907, I stood before my easel, gazing with loathing at a series of sketches I had executed in preparation for a portrait of a ten-year-old daughter of a Yonkers automobile whiz. Father and daughter were both gaudy and soulless, but their commission meant another three months' rent, and I had no other paying work. Circumstances had degenerated to the point that I had begun to consider teaching work again. To put the thought out of my mind, I started to mutter under my breath, and it was Heine's lines that came from my mouth. I do not remember beginning to paint, but I have a confused recollection that everything around me grew in intensity — became more there, is the only way I can articulate the experience. Colors, the sensation of breath in my lungs and the slight drag of the brush as I drew it across the canvas, the sound of rote German repeated endlessly, unconsciously, as the night flew. At last the mundane intervention of my bladder brought me out of this fugue, and when I had relieved myself I returned to the easel and with profound shock realized that I had not painted a daughter of the as-yet-unnamed Gasoline Aristocracy at all. I had painted a marvelous Albert Pinkham Ryder.

The Lorelei was near.

I THOUGHT TO SPEAK of this to Ryder, but the next time I saw him he was consumed with deranged optimism. "I am finding her again," he assured me as we regarded his latest work. "You see, Charles, what has become of me these last years. My reputation grows; everything I paint sells if I wish it to; but it's a Faustian bargain, because what I wish to paint is lost to me. Until now."

The canvas before me was — and this pains me terribly to say, because I have never admired any man the way I admired Pinkie Ryder — a miserable failure. Muddy, without any sense of composition, lacking even Ryder's typically casual approach to the human form. Stick figures against a background that might have been heath or ocean or sky. Ryder was then sixty, and would never again paint anything of any significance. At least part of this sad denouement is my fault. At the time I had an inkling of

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what was happening, and was idiotic enough to welcome it; only later would I understand what I had done. Again it would be Heine's lines that pulled back the veil.

Den Schiffer im kleinen Schiffe
Ergreift es mit wildem Weh;
Er schaut nicht die Felsenriffe,
Er schaut nur hinauf in die Höh.

Ich glaube, die Wellen verschlingen
Am Ende Schiffer und Kahn;
Und das hat mit ihrem Singen
Die Lorelei getan.

The sailor in his little boat is gripped with wild sighs; he doesn't see the reefs, he only looks at the sky. I believe the waves will fling both boat and man to their end — and that, with her song, the Lorelei did.

The night Ryder heard the Lorelei sing — through Frances Mulrooney if you will — he was painting himself bringing light to a tiny woman. In her voice he understood that he had gotten the situation exactly reversed, and turned to this old canvas, barely scratched upon, provoked by a spooky poem he had heard on a tour of Europe, to understand that he in fact was the fisherman, and the Lorelei — wherever she was — called him to a golden, melodic doom.

The Lorelei was his Galatea, and he a Pygmalion with brushes instead of chisels. He brought her to life. Before Ryder thought to paint her, she was a legend, a Rhineland Siren palely copied from whatever bastardized Homeric stories seafaring Teutons brought back from their Mediterranean adventures. His initial faltering starts on the painting brought her close enough to life that she could force herself the rest of the way. I pity Frances Mulrooney sometimes. What must it be like, to pledge yourself to a strange artist in the hall outside your apartment and then never see him again? Did she feel that she had been part of something larger even than love? Did she feel the Lorelei briefly alight on her as if she were an oasis in the desert between fantasy and the sensual world?

I romanticize this, but at the same time I believe what I write here.

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Part of it is an attempt to justify myself, yes, but I was a little bit in love with him as well. An admiring, courtly kind of passion. Even had I mustered the nerve to speak of it, nothing would have happened. Ryder was a childlike Petrarchan when it came to women, and a lover of good cigars and wine more than either sex. Perhaps this accounts for the Lorelei he created. One of the modern painters would create a Lorelei more like Rosie the Riveter than Homer's sirens, but Ryder and I were men of our times, and the Lorelei a frightened idealization of Woman and Art and the Unknown. Which for us were three different ways of saying the same thing.

Ryder's reefs were made of the Lorelei herself, or perhaps of his pursuit of her. The rocks on which I was to founder were composed of less rarefied stuff.

The Yonkers auto manufacturer revoked my commission when the deadline had passed and I could not even show him a study. I was desperate, and in my desperation made a decision that brought me tremendous success — and taught me how bitter success can be.

An artist knows no shortage of shady characters. We are a naïve lot, and where there is money and naïveté will be found all manner of swindlers and genteel criminals. One such was a man widely understood to be a trader in art of dubious provenance. I will call him Bruce Cleaves, since it would be petty of me to expose him after he did so much for me. I called Cleaves to my apartment and showed him the Ryder. He looked it over, and just like that I became a forger. Cleaves demanded a canvas per month from me, an inhuman schedule but a necessary one given that sooner or later buyers would catch on. He sold my Ryders in places where Ryder was known only by reputation: Oregon, Texas, Colorado, California. To this day there are movie moguls who proudly show their latest leading men and ladies my paintings on their library walls. Cleaves took care to broker some of my own work as well, primarily uninspired dockside scenes for tourists and others who want nothing more from art than a recapitulation of their own memories. As a result of this legitimate success, moderate though it was, I was able to court and marry Martha Van Pelt, the third daughter of an old New York family. Her father and aunt were devoted to Ryder's work, and I believe that I was granted her hand

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because I brought them both to his studio once in 1913. Ryder was then, at sixty-six, a kind of peripheral darling of American art; at the epochal Armory Show that same year, he was the only native artist hung in the central gallery. By bringing the two elder Van Pelts to the omphalos of this strange genius, I secured the hand of the woman I had come to love.

I also turned Ryder into a sideshow curiosity, but this was not my worst transgression against him. Without doubt the vilest deed of my life was stealing the Lorelei. He gave her life, and when he was weakened through the best intentions of his friend, I led him further astray.

Sometimes in lighter moods Pinkie would set Heine's words to the tune of a popular song, and lilt around the catastrophe of his studio as he dabbed at the Lorelei. At other times the sight of the perpetually unfinished work brought out a grim determination in him. As he grew more eccentric, he began to ask me to observe his progress on the painting, and God help me, I did everything I could to prolong his agony of conception. If the Lorelei was at the riverside, I suggested she perch on a rock; if she reclined, I suggested a standing posture; if he gave her blond hair, I remarked on the deep reds and oranges of sunset. For years I was able to tell myself a dual lie: that I was preserving myself and not injuring him because he would never have finished the painting on his own in any case, and that his financial well-being inured him against his periodic fits of Lorelei obsession. Only the part about self-preservation is true.

As long as I kept Pinkie heading down blind alleys, the Lorelei stayed with me. To this day I don't know whether I actually summoned her by murmuring Heine's lines while I stood at my easel, but after her annunciation in my room in 1907 I never dared alter the routine. Did she know Ryder had lost the initial force of genius that created her? Perhaps. I believe now that she battened on me because I was there when she sang in Frances Mulrooney's voice, and because Pinkie trusted me. She might have found a thousand more talented artists in New York, but I have had years of long nights to consider this, and I think she simply left master for disciple. Created by Ryder, she turned to a secondhand Ryder when the original began to fail her. When the creator fails the creation, what then?

All of this is an attempt to forge the numinous into a chain of logic. Foolish. In any event, it doesn't matter. In 1915, Ryder's health collapsed.

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He was hospitalized for some time, and upon his release he had to leave New York for the house of Charles and Louise Fitzpatrick, patrons and friends with a house on Long Island. He died in 1917, and the next year was given a one-man show at the Met. His death made my trade immensely lucrative; Cleaves once told me that there were at least three times as many ersatz Ryders as genuine, and I have done more than my share to fatten the ratio.

The Lorelei was found in his studio, nearly destroyed by his twenty-year obsession. Well-meaning admirers attempted to restore it, but she had been fading, and soon was entirely gone.

As was my career when, a year after Pinkie's death and soon after the Met show, Bruce Cleaves ran afoul of a sharp-eyed dealer in — of all places — Tulsa, Oklahoma. Cleaves took himself off to Europe, where I hear he is still in the business, mostly with Picassos and other contemporary pieces that are easy to slip over on a public with more money than taste. With the war, his fortunes took a turn for the better; Nazi confiscations increased demand for European art and made buyers less conscientious about determining provenance.

I was not so lucky — or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that after staving off my just deserts for eleven years, I was forced to take account of my life. At forty-four years old I was suddenly a glorified amateur landscape painter with a house far beyond my means and a childless marriage. As an act of penance I told Martha everything, and only then, abased and contrite, did I realize how magnificent was the woman Pinkie Ryder's acquaintance allowed me to marry. She was angry, of course — she is still angry, and twenty-five years have passed. In the midst of her fury she took hold of our financial affairs, sold the house and established us in more modest circumstances. Then she told me to paint. Since then she has never failed to give me space to work, and she has never failed to hold things together with iron competence and a good deal of financial acuity. We survived the difficulties after the Great War, and then the much worse collapse after Black Monday. Now we even own modest shares in General Motors, which makes me chuckle when I think of the Yonkers commission I neglected when the Lorelei appeared to me. Dear Martha. As in art, in marriage I have done much better than I deserved.

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I have never tried to paint a Ryder, never whispered the maybe-incantation of Heine's lines, since Pinkie himself died. That last year before Cleaves fled to Europe, he was selling off work I had completed while Pinkie lay bedridden at the Fitzpatricks'. I do not know if I could paint Ryder now, but I have my doubts. My suspicion is that the Lorelei has moved on.

I will be seventy in three months, Pinkie's age when he died. Here is my small penance.

During the past six months, I have put a good deal of effort into growing a beard. I think I will take my gray whiskers and I will go down to Washington Square Park. I will sit. In the darkness...well, it is difficult to find darkness in New York in this age of electric light, despite the wartime blackouts. I will sit in the park, and I will paint what light there is to find, and if a young man or young woman with eager eyes and an armful of canvas should happen by, I will try to find words to speak of the violence of feeling.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

BEFORE WE start, a quick note on my review for *The Lost Girls* by Laurie Fox in the August 2004 issue of this magazine.

I'd wondered why someone hadn't had a look at the story of Peter Pan from the perspective of the women, but of course someone had, as a reader (thank you, Alice) was kind enough to point out. Not only that, but I'd read the story before (memory, oh memory, where have you gone?). Called simply "Lost Girls," it was written by the inimitable Jane Yolen and originally appeared in *Twelve Impossible Things Before Breakfast* (Harcourt, 1997), although the version I read was a reprint in the February 1998 issue of *Realms of Fantasy*.

Utterly different from Fox's version, but no less intriguing.

And while we're dealing with old business, I was reading an essay by Darrell Schweitzer in the August 2004 issue of *The New York Review of Science Fiction* in which he opined that Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* (reviewed in the May 2004 installment of this column) was "just *Portrait of Jennie* with the genders changed, and ten times as long."

Now I don't agree with his take on Niffenegger's book — for one thing, I found the narrative voices in it very distinct and suited to the characters' ages as they jumped around in time — but Schweitzer makes a good point in comparing it to Robert Nathan's classic fantasy. It simply didn't occur to me while reading *The Time Traveler's Wife*, and it's interesting to compare the two. But what *did* occur to me while reading Schweitzer's essay was that this is as good a time as any to remind those of you who enjoy graceful fantasies in contemporary settings (contemporary to when Nathan was writing them, at least), that you might want to give Robert Nathan's books a try.

After reading and reviewing

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Portrait of Jennie (in the June 1999 installment of this column), I tracked down a half dozen other titles by Nathan in the on-line used book stores and thoroughly enjoyed them all. Tonight, before writing this, I found myself another half dozen — all the ones I bought were under five dollars — so they're still available if you poke about a little.

If you need touchstones, think Peter S. Beagle, or Thorne Smith — the latter for the humorous elements you can also find in Nathan's work. And if you aren't familiar with the work of either of those two gentlemen, do try them as well. I envy your chance to read them for the first time.

As for Robert Nathan, I would hate to see him forgotten, so I urge you to try *Portrait of Jennie* if you haven't yet. It's still available as a trade paperback from Tachyon Publications. They're on the Net at: *www.tachyonpublications.com.*

Well, that took a little longer than I thought it would, but it's column inches well spent if it garners the late Nathan a few more readers. I'd hate to see him become totally forgotten. As Nathan writes in *Jennie*: "Yesterday is just as true as today; only we forget."

The same holds for yesterday's writers, only we shouldn't forget.

Enna Burning, by Shannon Hale, Bloomsbury, September 2004, $17.95.

Which isn't to say that today's authors don't have much to offer as well.

Case in point, Shannon Hale and her sequel to last year's *The Goose Girl*. The new book is as charming as was the first, and you don't need any previous experience with the world Hale has created in order to enjoy it. Naturally, if you *have* read *The Goose Girl*, you'll pick up on resonances and relationships between the characters before a new reader will, but Hale quickly brings everybody up to date without having to resort to large info dumps.

The Goose Girl was the story of an exile named Isa, how she came to learn the speech of the wind and make a life for herself in the northern land of Bayern, eventually marrying the Bayern prince Geric.

A good author gives us secondary characters as fully rounded as the leads. When it's done right, we care about both, and it's easy to spin one of the secondary characters off into their own story, which

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is exactly what Hale has done for her second novel, *Enna Burning*.

Enna, friend and confidante of Princess Isa, has left the court and returned to her home in the Forest. When the book opens, her brother Leifer has mysteriously acquired the ability to speak to fire. Where Isa can hear the wind and control it to some extent, Leifer can do the same with fire.

But fire is a hungry mistress and it demands to be fed. When Leifer realizes he can't really control the fire, he sacrifices himself during a battle with an army invading Bayern from southern Tira, winning the day for Bayern by burning the Tiran troops, but paying the ultimate price as the fire consumes him as well.

The war isn't over, however, and when Enna finds the vellum manuscript from which her brother acquired his ability to speak to fire, she decides to learn the fire-speaking ability herself. She won't, she vows, make the mistakes her brother did, but we all know there wouldn't be much of a story if she didn't mess up, and mess up she does.

Things go from bad to worse and the characters learn valuable lessons about friendship, loyalty, and the dangers of trying to control what can't really be controlled.

Hale has a deft touch with her prose and characterization. The story is fast-paced and satisfying, and I especially liked how she was able to depict the ability to speak with the elements as both a wondrous thing and a terrible, soul-destroying power.

These books are marketed as YA, but they're as much YA as the work of Patricia McKillip or Diana Wynne Jones when it's marketed in the same way. The bottom line is that they're simply good books.

Blackbird House, by Alice Hoffman, Doubleday, 2004, $19.91.

There's a wonderful, intriguing format that lies in between the short story and the novel, and I don't mean a novelet or a novella. I'm speaking of a collection in which the stories, while retaining their stand-alone quality, share some sort of connection. Perhaps it's the setting; perhaps it's a repertory company of characters who move in and out of each other's stories.

Your background setting could be a planet, a city, or even an apartment complex such as Armistead Maupin used to such great effect in books like *Tales of the City*. Or you could pick a single house, out on Cape Cod, say, and follow the lives

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of the various people who lived in it, because who hasn't moved into a new house and wondered about the lives of its previous owners?

I'm guessing Alice Hoffman has.

Her Blackbird House on Cape Cod is a common clapboard building on a small piece of land near the sea, named for the blackbirds that can usually be found about it, although no one in the stories actually calls the house that. We get to see it being built and then take part in the joys and tragedies that touch the lives of its various inhabitants, all delivered in that simple, evocative language that makes Hoffman's books such a treat to read.

Mostly, these stories are character studies, and I'd suggest you read them a few at a time, rather than zip through the whole book in a single setting. Savor them as you would a fine wine or a dinner with close friends.

As is often the case with a Hoffman book, there is magic as well, more often implied than shown. In these pages there is a mysterious white blackbird that is either very long-lived, or begets a line of white-feathered descendants of which only one lives at a time. There are ghosts, too, and the possibility of a sea serpent crawling out of the tide and coming to land, leaving behind the smell of sulfur and a trail in the sand nearly four feet across.

But while such touches are always a welcome addition, it's Hoffman's deep understanding of what makes people — and therefore her characters — work that draws me to each new book, and to reread the ones that have come before.

Dead Man's Hands, by Tim Lebbon, Necessary Evil Press, 2004, $12.95.

I've always had a fondness for Westerns. Perhaps it comes from having grown up when there were only a couple of TV stations available and the Western was at the height of its popularity on the small and large screens. *Bonanza. Have Gun, Will Travel. How the West Was Won.*

I read my share of Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour books (and I'm sure that's where I acquired my fondness for Western landscapes — badlands, deserts, and mesas), but it wasn't until Joe Lansdale's *The Magic Wagon* and Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* series, when it first started to run in the pages of this magazine, that I became familiar with the weird Western.

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It's not a big sub-genre, so it's always of interest (at least to this reader) when something new is added to it.

Lebbon does a good job in *Dead Man's Hands*, telling the story of how an ordinary shopkeeper in the small desert town of Deadwood gets caught up in a meeting between what might be the angel Gabriel and what might be the devil, playing out an age-old struggle in the Old West. Oh, and for a bonus, we also learn the real details behind Wild Bill Hickock's death.

I read *Dead Man's Hands* from a galley, and as this is the first publication from a new small press, I can't vouch for what the final book will be like. The publisher promises cover and interior art by Canigala, a forward by Tom Piccirilli, an afterword by the author, and the books will be signed and numbered. Not a bad deal for $12.95, if the production values match up to the story they will be enhancing.

For more information, direct your browser to: *www.necessary evilpress.com*.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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Books

ELIZABETH HAND

Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell, by Susanna Clarke, Bloomsbury, 2004, $27.95.

One King, One Soldier, by Alexander C. Irvine, Ballantine Books, 2004, $13.95.

The Moon Pool, by A. Merritt, edited with an introduction by Michael Levy, Wesleyan University Press, 2004, $65.00 hc/$24.95 pb.

The Best of Xero, edited by Pat and Dick Lupoff, Tachyon Publications, 2004, $29.95.

Magic Is Coming: Look Busy!

I AM suffering from hype fatigue. Thus far in 2004, I've read four fantasy novels touted as the Publishing Event of the Year, for a total of 2,442 pages — entire tracts of old-growth forest laid waste. For the record, the novels were Flavia Bujor's *The Prophecy of the Stones* (abysmal); Neal Stephenson's *Quicksilver* (intermittently absorbing); Jasper Fforde's *Something Rotten* (intermittently amusing); and now Susanna's Clarke's *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* (very fine). As a reviewer, I did not have to pay for any of these books: If I had, they would have set me back more than a hundred bucks (including tax). This makes me think of "Selecting a Reader," a poem by Ted Kooser, wherein a down-at-the-heels woman in stained raincoat peruses a book of poetry.

> She will take out her glasses, and there
> in the bookstore, she will thumb
> over my poems, then put the book back
> up on its shelf. She will say to herself,
> "For that kind of money, I can get
> my raincoat cleaned." And she will.

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For a hundred bucks, you could buy a new raincoat. You could buy new glasses! Would I have paid for any these books with my own money? With the exception of *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*, no. Does this mean the novel lives up to its hype? Not quite, but it comes pretty damn close.

Jonathan Strange, which is Susanna Clarke's first novel, arrives bearing a hyberbolic quote by Neil Gaiman, who calls it "Unquestionably the finest English novel of the fantastic written in the last seventy years." Susanna Clarke can't be faulted for the hype or the quote — she spent ten years laboring on the book, which does not on its surface bear much resemblance to its fellows on the bestseller list, beyond its Brobdingnagian girth. It is an unusual novel, beautifully written in a pitch-perfect Jane Austen voice; its setting, an early nineteenth-century England familiar to readers of Austen, is vividly and lovingly evoked.

The novel's premise, like its setting, is not brand-spanking new: there are magicians in a seemingly mundane England (at this point, I would be very surprised to read a contemporary fantasy novel in which there are not magicians in England). Two of these magicians (who are sorcerers or wizards, not stage magicians), the gentlemen of the title, find themselves contemplating with growing unease the possible return of a third magician, the legendary Raven King. There is also an irruption, or interruption, upon the mundane world by the perilous realm of feared. The narrative is complex and peopled with dozens of memorable characters, from the dry-as-dust Mr. Norfolk to Stephen Black, a butler adopted by a fairy, to the fairy himself, identified throughout as "the gentleman with the thistle-down hair."

And there are footnotes: many footnotes. I am not a fan of footnotes in novels.[1] I find them an annoying[2] post-modern convention.

And this, in many ways, strikes me as the real weakness of *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* — it is being touted as an adult fantasy novel, but in fact it breaks very little new ground, and indeed covers much old ground. It bears striking similarities (including those interminable footnotes) to Jonathan Stroud's recent *The Amulet of Samarkand* — a less ambitious book than Clarke's, perhaps, but one

[1] *Tristram Shandy* notwithstandy.[1a]

[2] See?

[1a] Also Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman*.

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which I enjoyed more — as well as John Crowley's *Little, Big; Sorcery & Cecelia, or, The Enchanted Chocolate Pot,* by Patricia C. Wrede & Caroline Stevermer, another Austenian fantasy; Jack Vance's *Lyonesse* trilogy; Joan Aiken's Dido Twite novels; and the linked tales in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Kingdoms of Elfin*. Clarke also pays homage to the great tradition of English antiquarian folklorists — Thomas Keightley's *The Fairy Mythology* (1828), W. C. Hazlitt's *Dictionary of Faiths and Folklore* (1905), and Katherine Brigg's four-volume *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales* (1970-71), all of which inform Clarke's footnotes.

However, the book to which *Jonathan Strange* owes its most obvious debt is Hope Mirrlees's sui generis (not anymore, I guess) *Lud-in-the-Mist*, one of the greatest fantasy novels ever written. I suspect Gaiman's canny use of "seventy years" rather than a hundred serves to ringfence *Lud*, a novel he much admires and which was first published in 1926. Mirrlees's novel suffuses Clarke's like a blush: the melancholic tone; the notion of antiquarian Mysteries coming to light and changing the nature of the world; the echoes of sad airs played upon antique instruments; the mournful conception of Faerie and its inhabitants. Clarke's gentleman with the thistle-down hair seems a direct descendent of Mirrlees's Duke Aubrey, just as the characterization of *Lud*'s protagonist, Master Nathaniel Chanticleer, appears to have influenced Messers Norrell and Strange.

If I had never read *Lud-in-the-Mist* (or *Little, Big*), would *Jonathan Strange* have impressed me more? Perhaps; though I found its langourous pace deeply problematical: it remains very much a first novel, with a first novel's portmanteau charms and weaknesses. Much of the pleasure in reading *Jonathan Strange* comes from witnessing a writer discover and fall in love with her own narrative voice. That voice is probably the book's greatest achievement — Clarke writes lovely, long, immersive sentences, but there are a great many of them. William Faulkner famously observed that to write a good novel, you must kill your little darlings. *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* would have been a genuinely great novel, and not just an exceptionally good one, if there had been more blood on the floor — I don't wonder if there are magicians in England, but I do wonder if there are editors.

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Hype being what it is, the commercial success of *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* seems assured, even if it weren't such a strong debut. Still, there are all those English fantasies of the last seventy years. Is Susanna Clarke's first novel really finer than *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, the *Gormenghast* sequence, *The Once and Future King*, *Elidor* or *The Owl Service*, *The Third Policeman* (Irish, not English, but still), *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* or *Nights at the Circus*, *Signs of Life* or *Virconium*, *Hawksmoor*, *Lempriere's Dictionary*, *Watership Down* or *The Girl in a Swing* or *His Dark Materials*?

I don't think so. But maybe her second novel will be.

Go Rimbaud

Turning from Susanna Clarke's first novel to Alexander Irvine's latest is like switching radio channels from a recording of Hayden's "The Seasons" to Charles Mingus's "Theme for Lester Young." *One King, One Soldier* is a rambling, energetic, sometimes shambolic road novel whose numerous side trips encompass Rimbaud, the Beats, baseball, and the Holy Grail. "Shambolic" is not necessarily a bad thing in this context — road novels (like road movies) are by their very nature eccentric, erratic, even stumbling, just like real journeys. Irvine's protagonist, Lance Porter, is a recent Korean War vet, tentatively making his way back into American society after having his leg blown away in combat. His effort at repatriation is almost immediately derailed during a visit to the California Bay Area, where he meets a scruffy, drunken, obscenity-spouting gay Beat poet named Jack Spicer. Spicer is a brilliant acquisiton on the author's part — an actual, if marginal, Beat whom I had never heard of (and I thought I knew these guys!). Spicer serves as an unreliable guide and gadfly to Lance, sending him on a delirious quest to discover his own true identity — is he Lancelot? the Fisher King? just another disenfranchised war veteran?

Irvine does a neat job of subverting the typical tropes of contemporary urban fantasy, by throwing all his cards on the table early on, as though they were a handful of road maps: "Okay, kids — this is where we are now, and we're going here, and here, and here, and here —" The pleasures of *One King, One Soldier* derive not from figuring out the mystery as from

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simply enjoying the trip. Irvine is a very fine writer, and he creates great Real Guys — it's easy to imagine Lance Porter hanging out with Dean Moriarty and his lot. He also does a creditable job with Arthur Rimbaud, one of those larger-than-life characters whom novelists approach at their peril.

Where the novel falters is in its immense and perhaps overly ambitious scope: any book that takes on not just the Beats and Rimbaud's years in Abyssinia but the Knights Templar, baseball, twentieth-century American race relations, and the Arthurian cycle is biting off a lot. Bernard Malamud attempted something like this in *The Natural*, but Malamud's focus was tighter, his time frames and settings conventional. With *One King, One Soldier*, Irvine has set himself an imposing itinerary, a cross-world, cross-time quest to see and explore a thousand years of legend, lore, and undying love. It's no surprise that the journey spirals out of hand, but it's an exhilarating trip all the same. Next time, could we please stop at Rock City?

The Shining Ones

It is impossible today to read A. Merritt without, at some point, wincing or grimacing at his racist and sexist stereotypes, or laughing out loud at his over-the-top prose. It is also, for some of us, impossible not to go on reading. I first encountered Merritt in the late 1960s, when I was enthralled by *The Moon Pool*. I went on to track down most of his other works — *The Ship of Ishtar, The Fox Woman and Other Stories, Dwellers in the Mirage, The Face in the Abyss, The Metal Monster*, and my personal favorite, *Seven Footprints to Satan*. Even as a kid, I knew a lot of this was hokey — the perilously seductive lamia-like women, the lost worlds hidden at the Earth's core, the spunky male sidekicks, the nefarious foreigners who attempt (vainly) to thwart Merritt's muscular heroes. It was hokey, but it was also irresistible: *Seven Footprints to Satan*, along with John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, remained favorite summer reading for many years.

The Moon Pool, however, always seemed to me to be the best-written of Merritt's books. Many readers might beg to differ with me on this point; many might wonder if Merritt deserves to be read at all anymore. Me, I remain a fan. I recently picked up the new Wesleyan University Press reprint, edited and

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scrupulously annotated by Michael Levy, and was once again hooked:

> Thus it was that we first saw the city of the Dweller; blessed and accursed as no place on earth, or under or above earth ever has been — or, that force willing which some call God, ever again shall be!
>
> "*Chert*," whispered Marakinoff. "Incredible!"
>
> "Trolldom!" gasped Olaf Huldricksson. "It is Trolldom!"
>
> "Listen, Olaf!" said Larry [O'Keefe]. "Cut out that Trolldom stuff! There's no Trolldom, or fairies, outside Ireland. Get that! And this isn't Ireland. And, buck up, Professor!" This to Marakinoff. "What you see down there are people — *just plain people*. And wherever's there's people is where I live. Get me?
>
> "There's no way in but in, and no way out but out," said O'Keefe. "And there's the stairway. Eggs are eggs no matter how they're cooked — and people are just people, fellow travellers, no matter what dish they are in," he concluded. "Come on!"
>
> With the three of us close behind him, he marched toward the entrance.

They don't write 'em like that anymore. I for one am sorry they don't — not sorry to lose the casual racism and sexism, but to lose the ebullient energy and intelligence, the scientific and cultural curiosity that colored Merritt's best work.

The Moon Pool first appeared in *All-Story* in 1918, and in book form a year later. Levy refers to Sam Moskowitz's biography of Merritt, which "notes that many of the people who wrote letters to the editor of *All-Story Weekly* following the original novelette version of 'The Moon Pool' wanted to know if the story were true." Merritt was immensely popular in his time, and reprint versions of his work continued to appear decades after their original publication. As Levy puts it,

> It's hard to overstate the notoriety this story attained. It was enormously popular and instantaneously catapulted Merritt into the first rank of science-fiction writers behind only Edgar Rice Burroughs, a level of popularity he maintained well into the 1940s. A

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> comparable phenomenon of a more recent day might be seen in the public reception given William Gibson's *Neuromancer* in 1984.

Levy does a terrific job of placing the novel firmly within its time, showing the numerous historical and scientific trends that influenced it — Theosophy, astronomical discoveries, the geophysical theories that gave credence to the novel's Hollow Earth setting — as well as noting Merritt's debt to the writer William Sharp, who published many tales and plays based upon Irish folklore, writing under the name Fiona MacLeod. Levy also encapsulates the Merritt backlash spearheaded by James Blish in a damning 1957 essay.

> The style [of *The Moon Pool*] is both windy and cliche-ridden, as well as being ungrammatical with great frequency. The scientific rationale ...has been turned by time into nonsense. The characters are stock.... *The Moon Pool* appears to be purely a private work, written out of Merritt's dream life....

It's difficult to argue with any of these statements, but for some of us, the hallucinatory, often terrifying sequences that distinguish Merritt's best work — the abduction of members of a scientific expedition by the Dweller in the Moon Pool; the visionary "Through the Dragon Glass" — continue to cast a powerful spell. We live in a culture that, for all its excesses — reality TV, the Internet, shopping malls the size of minor emirates — casts a cold eye upon stylistic excess in prose. Merritt may not be as great a writer as Jack Vance or Gene Wolfe or Angela Carter, but he's kin to them all the same — in Levy's words, "To put it simply and to use one of the touchstones of the field, Merritt's work brims to overflowing with sense of wonder." It's good to have Michael Levy and Wesleyan University Press remind us of this.

It's also good to see Virgil Finlay's elegant, eerie, black-and-white illustrations reproduced. I'm fortunate enough to own several pulp reprints of Merritt's work, including a January 1941 copy of *Fantastic Novels Magazine* that reprints "People of the Pit," with a gorgeous color Finlay cover and Finlay's B&W illustrations inside. The magazine also contains a fan letter from the twenty-year-old editor of the fanzine *Futuria Fantasia*, extolling the work of Finlay and Hannes Bok,

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whom he thinks "capture that *outre* tone that is necessary to this art form." I was delighted to see that, even in 1941, another reader appreciated the outré. I was even more pleased to note the young letter-writer's name: Ray Bradbury.

Tales of the Wisdom of the Ancients

And, finally, a book that has afforded me more entertainment than anything else I've read all summer: *The Best of Xero: Selections from the Hugo Award Winning Magazine*, edited by Pat and Dick Lupoff and with an introduction by Roger Ebert. *Xero* was a fanzine published in the early 1960s. It featured essays and reviews by a stellar Who's Who of sf writers: Harlan Ellison, Ruth Berman, James Blish, Ed Gorman, Algis Budrys, Richard Kyle, Lin Carter, Jack Chalker, Dick Lupoff, Frederik Pohl and, yes, *that* Roger Ebert — the list goes on and on and on. Donald E. Westlake gives the field a caustic farewell in "Don't Call Us...We'll Call You," an incendiary indictment of John W. Campbell's reign. Avram Davidson contributes "He Swooped on His Victims and Bit Them on the Nose," as well as a long poem titled "Reader Beware." Paul Williams complains about Lin Carter complaining about the rising cost of paperbacks (fifty cents). The raw energy and excitement about what was still a Lost World of its own informs every page of this provocative volume. ☙

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His F&SF *debut is a challenging tale of art and technology in the not-too-distant future. It's probably fair to call this story a virtuoso performance.*

Keyboard Practice, consisting of an Aria with diverse Variations for the Harpsichord with two manuals

By John G. McDaid

The preservation of artistic and emotional integrity...is hardly ever the preoccupation of artists whose lives are made up of intrigue, rivalry, comparison and tiresome repetitiveness.

— Bruno Monsaingeon
Le dernier Puritain

Aria

I'M AN UNRELIABLE NARRATOR. Everything I know about classical piano could be stored handily, uncompressed, in the lobotomized set-top box of an antique cathode television. Still, it falls to me to transcribe the events surrounding the Van Meegeren Piano Competition of 2023 and the alleged visitation by the late Stefan Janacek.

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Variation 1

Stassy intro, nep?

Yar, yar, copied; 'swhatcha get when I type not talk. *Gomenasai.* Not a storyspeaker—*ich bin eine musicalische* opster. I clip, I doop, I rap, I dub and shunt, pull leitmotifs from the noosphere 'n' singledoubletriple layer, pack and run the tuples, skiffy ins-n-outs wrapped moebial around sparse, selective, show-don't-tell syllables relevated from the subway and limousine earth. A hardwired hook sniffer: What edge will cut through the commodified wash of minute-15 Will-Have-Beens? Hafta lay down a tuff rhythm groove and scan for a tasty solo line; grimly practical, paratactical composition.

But a keyboard is needed to massage this medium. Got to force myself to sit down, sluice, educe the force that through these carpal tunnels drives the florid. Grep the keystroked sense of this, in at least a first approximation, before it evanesces.

Because I don't believe in ghosts. I never have. I never will. And yet, tonight...

And yet tonight, I saw one.

With my own eternally doubting fingers.

Variation 2

You'll want, first, to know where it happened.

The Van Meegeren Competition has been housed in the Cleveland Play House for as long as it has been supervised by Mona Tzedak. Our Bolton Theatre is a roomy but intimate 500-seat house with warm reflections and a pear-shaped decay profile. Sound infrastructure's a bit long of tooth — 1.5GHz wireless — but the boardware is current rev, and Net rights from the Van Meegeren underwrote the extravagance of a top-shelf smart pAIno.

"Welcome to Ohio!" Mr. Costello, Competition chair, drooled to the first-night corporate *oyabun* in the orchestra seats, "Even our name says hello!" A sweating functionary twisting amid Tzedakian gusts; protégé of the prior chair we forced from office.

Mona long ago offloaded administrivia to a series of the ambitious

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semi-talented. They never lasted long, artistes Peter-Principled up way past competence. The passively offensive King Logs slid oilily among Net execs; *les rois* Stork came unglued almost immediately, issuing executive orders about coffee room behavior, thundering at the box-office staff, huffing threats of legal action against the insubordinate.

Within weeks of appointment last February, Costello's storky predecessor tried to fire one of our Local 27 brothers, and had to be sandbagged in his parking lot, pounded like *carpaccio* and dumped in the snow to learn humility. He submitted a resignation — for health reasons, which was true — shortly thereafter.

"We're honored to have an outstanding field of seventy-seven young pianists, representing thirty-two nations," Costello voiceovered in front of the obligatory montage on the PPV videoscrim: cross-dissolves of grimy practice rooms; upstage hover-shot zooms into strobing fingers; standing ovations; Cyrillic airport kiss 'n' flies. "Over the next two weeks," he continued, "we'll narrow this to the eight you'll see in the final round on August fifth. And now, let me introduce our judges...."

Live pit image replaced canned vid, as our camjock, Terry Garrison, tracked over this year's assemblage of academics, industry hacks, and C-lebs. Uniform expression of serious thoughtfulness masking dread and boredom. Mona skipped the first two rounds, and it was hard to find half a dozen people in the Biz who had *ever* listened to keyboard at this level. If I wasn't feeding our pAIno's commentary to their earpieces, most would have been stupefyingly clueless.

Variation 3

"Caveat: Young players, no matter how dexterous, are well advised to avoid the *Goldbergs*, competent performance of which requires ability to enter Bach's mindspace — an intersubjectivity irreducible to mere finger exercises."

— Stefan Janacek
Footnote to Rule Eleven,
Van Meegeren entry form

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The *Goldberg Variations* comprised an idée fixee for the late Stefan Janacek, and after he won the Competition and came on board in 2009, he inserted the infamous Rule Eleven.

Aside from that outlier, the Van Meegeren was much like any other international music contest. Pianists between the ages of sixteen and twenty-seven were welcome to come play — provided they could pony up the entry fee and find a way to get to Cleveland. There were three rounds of judging, with the first cutting the field to about twenty, and the second to eight. Finalists competed for $30K silver and $20K bronze medals. And, nominally, for a big $50K gold — but it had been years since a top prize had been awarded.

Rules specified the repertoire for each round. The first — easiest — required a skill level equivalent to Chopin's *Fantasia in F minor* Op. 49. You heard Liszt, Debussy, Boulez.

Second level upped the ante to Messiaen, Ravel, Stockhausen, and Takemitsu. The ambitious might try Beethoven's *Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major*, Op. 73.

For the final round, you were looking at the likes of Mozart's *Rondo* in A minor, Schubert's *Impromptu* Op. 90, Bartok's *Out of Doors Suite*, or Schoenberg's *Five Pieces* Op. 23. You could hear Hindemith, Sorabji, and Webern.

There were the usual terms and conditions: Random order of performance established before start, accommodations provided only during participation, no legal action against jurors, winners perform without compensation at the gala concert closing night, all recordings property of the Competition.

Then came Rule Eleven: "For any round, indeed, for *all* rounds, you may perform Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations*." Inserted at Janacek's insistence, over the strenuous objections of the Board, Rule Eleven has puzzled and vexed aspiring pianists. What was Janacek thinking?

Was Rule Eleven a gauntlet thrown down to would-be successors? Or did Janacek, for some reason, want to ensure that the *Goldberg*s would torment the minds and fingers of students in perpetuity? I have my suspicions, revolving around that "irreducible intersubjectivity" clause. But then, I'm only a sound guy.

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Variation 4

Only reason I get to run pAIno is union rules. Nobody, not even *La Papessa Tzedak*, dicks with IATSE. The International Alliance of Theatrical and Stage Employees — IA for short — is the collective bargaining entity for all crafts involved in production. A hundred years ago, that was carps, electrics, and props. Now the union includes the whole digital fx gang, cam jocks, and AI warez. SAG has the synthespians, but we have all the below-the-line bots.

And that hardware is scrappin' smart, clued? Manny, our retrofitted Hamburg Steinway, was the current Play House shop steward. He always paid his dues, never missed a meeting, and represented us forcefully. The times when lack of mobility (and hands) posed problems — like the parking-lot negotiating session with King Stork — were more than offset by his facility with language, deep lookahead, and connections with the Accounting systems.

So it was perfectly true that Manny could adjust the nap on his erectile polymer keysurfaces, to any arbitrary degree of precision, in response to spoken requests from performers. But not with house rules like we have here. So when the second contestant wanted a little more friction on the keys, he had to politely ask me. And I could relay that, in appropriate techspeak, to Manny: "Yo, Man. Cudja dial up a few more nanometers on the iVorex?"

"I could, but will I?" Like many thinking things, Manny took synthetic pleasure in tweaking his handlers. Good-natured office chatter; we were buds. Being massively polyphonic, he could carry on a conversation with me on the headphone loop while simultaneously being played and narrating for the jury on their circuit. Manny chuckled and continued, "Did it the minute he sat down."

"Thanx. Howdja know?"

Manny took a minute to listen before answering; the contestant — who had, with much bravado and little common sense, invoked Rule Eleven — was off to a strong start. The Aria had been crisp and distinctive, and he was making good time by skipping repeats on the early variations.

"The Prophet Alan Turing took quite seriously the objection to AI on the grounds of ESP. He accepted that there might be subtle human

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faculties irreducible to the digital which might thwart machine intelligence. What he did not fully consider is that we might not only equal, but also better, our human creators in this department."

"So you can read minds? Yeah, right."

"Bite my shiny lacquered ass. You know the key breakthrough in AI was emulating human Machiavellian modeling."

"Yah, I think that he thinks, and he thinks I'm thinking...*und so weiter*."

"*Klar*. Turing had a prescient inkling of that, almost a hundred years ago. He was right, you can't code it. But you *can* code systems so that it emerges."

"So, Herr Professor Doktor Machiavelli, what's next for Friction Boy?"

"He's about to tank on the repeat."

Which the kid, unsurprisingly, did. Too amped for his early slot, he had powered through on adrenaline. When he finally executed a repeat on the "A" section of Variation 5 and had to rewind mentally, his muscle memory fell out of synch. Manny pointed it out to the judges, who began to whisper to their pods visibly as he orated:

"At this level, once technic rises to awareness, it falls to bits. A true Zen emptiness is called for when engaging a repeat, which requires subtle yet significant shadings of difference, spliced into a flawless reproduction of the just-lived performance. 'The unconscious,' as Jacques Lacan said, 'is repetition.'"

"Okay, fine." I waited till he was through spinning fashionable nonsense for the jury. "Really, how'd you anticipate that?"

A phatic sigh. "GSR, Mike. Kid's sweating like the glamour loop on a beercan."

Variation 5

I promised you a ghost story, and so far, there has been only ambient sound. How long can I tease?

Not having any schematic for such a tale, I seek refuge in a broad alluvial fan of context, within which the flickering possibility of the Other World can meander. Try explaining the Appalachian mountains by

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unfolding any isolated ground-level fact. Adios, Galileo. But pullback to space, as local geography blurs into a chain of wrinkles echoing, across a growing span of ocean, the matching bulge of Africa, and suddenly the tectonic heresy inverts to syllogism.

So I return to the music. There is something magical in the sweep of the *Goldbergs*, which begin — and end — with a rather plain Aria, whose bass line serves as the subject for thirty variations.

What fascinated Janacek, I think, was the way that simple theme became endlessly ramified, and yet, somehow, retained its identity. Particularly in the canons, which occur at every third variation, where the theme becomes reentrant.

Simply put, a canon is a tune that can be overdubbed on itself. For theorists, it's the effect of self-accompaniment produced when a sequence of notes, the *dux*, is joined by a second voice, the *comes*, which takes up the same melody offset temporally or tonally. "*Frère Jacques*" is the entry-level example.

What counts as "sameness" in this context varies widely: It can be identical notes, entering a measure later, or it could be cognate intervals played in reverse order a fifth above and one note late. J. S. Bach was the uncontested master of the form, and Janacek, with his gold-prize rendition, the unrivaled performance standard.

"Why do we do this?" sez Friction Boy. End of the first day, I was playing localhost, walking contestants along Euclid toward Michelsen, their economical dorm lodging on Case Western's south quad.

"Do what?" sez Jamie Sheldon, the oldest of the four Americans.

"I mean, if Mozart or Webern were composing now, don't you think they'd be working on the Net? They wrote music to be heard. Enjoyed."

"I think you have a better case with Mozart," mutters Sheldon.

"You can reach more people with one location theme in a major metro." Lemieux, the French kid.

"Bach wrote just for Keyserling," sez one of the Canadians, a teenager named Charles Johnson.

"And why should we have to do things live anyway?" Friction Boy's on a soapbox now. "I thought Glenn Gould settled that argument sixty years ago?"

"Well," sez Johnson diffidently, "Gould was really about creating

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music of the highest technical standards; he argued against fetishizing imperfection simply because it existed historically." They look at him skeptically, but this kid knows something. I try to countersink his point.

"Said for true. Gotta remember," I try a light tone, "before the 1950s, you didn't have punch-ins; editing was done with a razor. Even most recorded performances were complete takes."

"So why should we be judged live then? Why not let us do it the way we'd really do it? Work on the pieces for as long as we need, with all the tech?"

Now they're looking at me like I'm supposed to answer. I have no stomach for playing *amicus hostis*, but dub-tee-eff. We're all talking to keep the conversation alive.

I fish around in my pack and come out with an antique ratchet driver. "Anybody know what this is?"

"Yah," A wry drawl from Johnson. "That's whatya tune a piano with."

"No way," sez the youngest, just sixteen, from Kirghizstan, "For real?"

I pull out the 440 fork and ping it on the ratchet. We've turned the corner of Euclid and Adelbert, a grainy Cleveland municipal theme on the earbuds. They cluster around. Most of the talented ones who make it this far do not realize just how blessed, insulated, and elevated they truly are. They have lived in a world of self-adjusting devices that never slip out of tune. Unless told to do so.

"A real sound tech needs to know how to run things — in real time — just in case the prod hardware goes down. You gotta be able to *do* things, precisely, but deal with changes. 'Sdiff between repeat marks and copy-paste."

"But why realtime? Whatsa crunch about that?" Unsurprisingly, this is Friction Boy; blush response pinking up his already doomed neck. Minor mistakes don't eliminate first rounders, but the pressure's only going to increase.

"Okay. Take the score for the *Goldbergs*. You could break that down into pure MIDI data, right? And you could record the key attack information one note at a time, then assemble it onto a timeline. And, *hoc est corpus*, you've got Bach."

"Arhh, that's brain-dead siff-ma propaganda."

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"Is it? Don't you feel that there is some value in being able to play Variation Twenty-six in real time, doing those crossover runs from hand to hand? Is it really the same to build it synthetically? PAInos still don't quite get it. You've spent your whole life developing that skill. You tell me that's completely worthless."

We've reached the train tracks which split the quad, cityscape visible down the line. As I lead them across the overpass, set thrumming by an Acela Lakeshore hurtling past beneath, you can almost hear them digesting the idea. Strains of the Amtrak grade-crossing motif, "Look, listen, live" drift from the catenary wires into the soundscape, and my delicate young visitors, chastened and introspective, are quiet for the rest of the walk to the dorm.

Variation 6

> "We are, all of us, machines, insofar as we treat the score with subservient deference. This abdication of responsibility can never produce art, only a pale, narcissistic reflection."
>
> — Stefan Janacek
> *The Idea of Orthogonality*

Mona was somewhere north of sixty. A taut, wiry frame, confined to a smart wheelchair, augmented here and there with robotic prostheses: her right eye had been replaced with an Ikegami biocam, her right arm from the elbow down was mechanical, and the chair helped her brain communicate with her lower body.

There are some injuries that are still beyond the restorative power of neotenous neural implants. The accident that took Mona's arm also left her a C5 quad.

Eventually, biotech would catch up, but until then, her chair, a semi-intelligent late-model Fredersen, provided hand control, mobility, and artificial sympathetic innervation. Mona was continent, had near-normal respiration and muscle tone, and experienced sensations transcoded by the chair. Even without a wetware hotfix, within a couple of years, all this gear would fit in a hip-pack and she'd be back up and walking.

Mona led the movement, in the early years of the century, to keep

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concert-level piano alive. She fought a valiant rear-guard action against the emerging behavioral sinks of interactive visualization and real-time soundtracks, trying to save otherwise talented young musicians from executing interminable low-rez pop motifs on work-for-hire contracts.

Those were dark days for true musicianship, and the field owed her big-time. But I struggled to reconcile that missionary work with the brutal behavior I'd seen in my five years in Cleveland. Her full-bore critiques, often delivered before the performer quite knew they were *done*, were idiosyncratic, adamantine, methodically dismissive, and either brutally honest or sociopathically mean, depending on your point of view.

Mona's behavior was embarrassing to some, but it delivered acceptable cross-media numbers for MS-Fox. She managed a delicate *lissajous* between high-culture and anti-intellectual *Schadenfreude* that kept her, and the Competition, in the summer lineup year after year. Questionable pedagogy, perhaps, but it was crafty Netvid.

And avant-garde leaders are often — perhaps necessarily *always* — misunderstood by those not *avant* enough to appreciate the larger karmic rightness of their vision. Everybody likes a fat, smiley Buddha; not so many are down with Kali. Yet, without Lachesis and Atropos, we'd all be hip deep in undifferentiated Clotho.

Bottom line? A few semi-talented dreamers get their wakeup call. B.A.U., boyzngrrls, it's a tough old mother of a world.

A week from Monday is load in for our next show, *The Portage to East Orange of Richard N.* Life goes on for the hands; for us, the Competition is just, after all, two weeks out of the year. A pleasant vacation from reality, albeit with a higher than average chance of jinking with the visiting artistes....

Variation 7

Technological change is incessant and memory is fleeting. It may be surprising to recall that not until the turn of the century could computers even talk, and it was the late teens before AIs could compose and perform. Viz, if you can, reading music from paper, note by note, and inputting that into a keyboard with your fingers. And not only the Society for Musical Anachronism played that way. This was just how stuff worked.

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So imagine the primitive state of things in 1993, when the Van Meegeren debuted as an obscure regional event, hosted at Michigan Tech on the Upper Peninsula. The eponymous Van Meegerens were the remnants of a local copper-mining dynasty; just enough trust fund capital left to endow a high-culture headstone for their forebears.

Back then, you could collect in one room the top-notch pianists left in the world. Purely the work of the Invisible Hand: consumer indifference coupled with the rise of Internet culture and the withering away of appreciation for the time-consuming technics of the keyboard.

The groups that gathered in those music rooms for hardware performance and F2F crit were skin-in-the-game participants, attempting to forge a future for an artform that even then must have sensed it was being slipstreamed by its sexier, more media-savvy counterparts.

Archive video from the MTU years offers puzzling evidence. There is the mid-life Mona, a roving, vocal gadfly, very much critic and leader, but throughout, with an underlying spirit of egalitarian recognition. Was it because the players were better in those days? Was the cohort more finely selected?

How did we get to the red button?

A confession — and digression — here. I wasn't tugging you: I really am typing this. Woah, you think, is this some effing Luddite? Couldn't I speakwrite it just as true?

No, and no. I'm one of the last amphibians, trained in the old keyboarding ways, both musical and textual. While I'm Morrison-down with the polymorphous perversity of the endlessly dancing digital, there is a deep *juissance* to inscription. One of our earliest acts as humans was to notch a narrative of the night sky on bones; the ineluctable permanence of hardware writing gives rise to certain habits of thought: Notions of fixity, reification, and external reference whose ultimate distillation is "*dubito, ergo sum.*"

It's that Cartesian doubt which sez Janacek was a mere hallucination. (But then, what was it in me that believed what it saw?)

Variation 8

"You don't know what it's like to be played," sez Manny. "To feel yourself set in motion, responding to a flurry of touch behind which you begin to feel something of the Player's mind. Good pianists, like Stefan,

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that is. With the ham-handed dunces who typically sit down here, you feel only sweaty indecisiveness."

"Hmm." I stopped playing, glanced at my palms, took a long pull of my Stegmaier.

"Ideas of reference are a serious symptom."

"Bite me hard."

"Consider yourself bitten." Manny went on, "My fantasy is not to know whether I am being played, or performing myself. The keys just seem to move as the fingers come down. Are they being pressed, or am I moving them? There is sometimes a moment where the boundaries blur; fingers tunneling through some tricky passage — say, 'Variation Eight' — and me, responding, me being the music....

"Sometimes, in those moments, I feel that the player and I are one."

A couple of things occurred to me. Whether Freudian or cognitivist, you had to wonder about the oneness experience for an AI like Manny. What must it be like to be able to read and reproduce music, yet still to be just that infinitesimal from world-class, truly *surprising* performance. (Or composition — the only reason agents still trawled the Van Meegeren.) For beings that *knew* they were created, whose life was circumscribed by a codebase, where was that ultimate validation, if not in their programmers...users...inhabitors?

But then I began to wonder about whether we — the nominally human — were really so different. Early civilizations believed that their gods talked to them all the time, and occasionally played them like big meat pianos. Some people still believe it. Who am I to disagree? I went back to practicing the trills in "Variation 24."

Variation 9

"The urge for authentic Being haunts ego in Western culture, where rôles denoting true mastery are limited. Boiling up from the unconscious, it culminates, and is channeled, into the Net, where at last, one has a spot on the world stage — but no one cares. Fifteen minutes comes and goes, one has a cup of coffee in the majors, struts and frets, and vanishes without a trace."

— Stefan Janacek

On Chance and Necessity in the Creative Process

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I had been up all night. I like to hang with the talent, or the enders, anyway, those that make it down to the final week. By that point, people are either loose and weird, fun to be with and ready for anything, or else they're locked up with fear at having made it this far, grimly aware that the next time they set foot on the stage, there is every probability that the *Dea ex Machina* is going to frappé them.

In the corner of the dorm lounge, ranged around a beat-up Chickering suitable only for Plink, this year's twenty semifinalists laugh nervously and debate musicology.

"Neo-Cagism is a wasted paradigm. What SFMA needs is a return to musical absolutes." Friction Boy, who's made it this far, now aspires to be Theory Man.

But Jamie Sheldon is having none of it. "No, no, no. It all depends on context. Even a plain vanilla C chord can also be an E-minor augmented fifth."

"Or a G suspended-fourth sixth, without the fifth," sez Charles Johnson.

"Or...," adds Sheldon.

"Okay, okay. Point taken." He retreats verbally, but I can see him marking both his interlocutors for slow death.

Over on the coffee table, some of the artistic ones are scribbling designs. The survivors — sorry, contestants — bravely make, but never actually wear, vaguely subversive T-shirts every year; I have a collection of the last six. The first says, "I survived Mona." Another, in a bold word balloon, "You're not fit to play Beethoven! Get off my stage!" (That victim had only gotten the first five notes in. In the war for attention, Mona took no prisoners.)

The last couple are live-action chirpscreens, my favorite with Mona slapping the button and shouting, "Cut off your hands and bury your keyboard!" Garrison had really nailed the angle, zoom-in revealing forehead veins that throbbed obligingly, without any digital enhancement.

Watching each cohort splayed around the dorm mulling this year's grim candidates was like some pointed documentary about the deinstitutionalized. You kept longing to hear one misguided McMurphy leap to his feet, shouting, "Eff it, eff it all, let's just hang out and play...." Never happened. Not again. Mona had set up a branch office in their heads.

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For her, and for them now, there was no middle ground: It was perfection or failure. You either sold to the bare shelves, or you were gone, gone, gone; no second chances, no mitigating circumstances.

Rail as you will against the Competition, it is performance culture in microcosm; a tough-love winnowing of the merely facile from the true virtuosos. In a society overrun by globalization, where music had been reduced to commerce's stepchild, Mona was the last one with enough of the System's ear to make judgment calls on talent. Should we fault her for the guts to make those calls?

Sure, last-round Tzedakoids had a certain similarity of temperament. She was still haunted by Janacek's shattered vessel, and wherever she found fallen sparks, was she to be blamed for rewarding them? Likewise, her terminal impatience with dross practitioners, the incessant slush limning distant Avalon. When you live only to hear a note forever lost, can impatience be a sin? Well, can it?

And you don't want to encourage the hopeless. Hell no. You end up wandering an incestuous digital souk crammed with the Living Dead selling each other slash tunes. (Welcome to the Net!)

Variation 10

"Effing Mona," rumbles Terry Garrison. "Costello only *thinks* he's in charge. She hauled me into the green room tonight and criticized every damned transition." We were killing a few in Fingal's Cave, the tony post-show bar on Carnegie, hard by the Cleveland Clinic. The Cave's gigless thesp waitrons usually sniff disdainfully at hands, but tonight, producer Pat Bryant's platinum card was buying a measure of respectful obliviousness.

I shrugged. "She knows all. Sees all." Garrison, the viz opster, spent his time flip-flying the helium cambots and running instant post-production. IA, so there wasn't much Mona could really do but make him miserable. I tried an aphorism. "*L'état, c'est elle.*"

"*Oui,*" chuckles Bryant. "Talk about the virgin and the dynamo. She's both." He was one of the few industry types who really knew the keyboard. Should have been a judge, but he said he "preferred the epiphenomenon." Bryant liked the inside track, and when he hit town, we'd hang and feed him backstage dope.

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"But every sagging detail." Garrison won't let it go. "Ranting about sub-frame-accuracy on the edits."

Bryant smiled, shrugged. Took a long draw of his Singapore Sling. He plays the eccentric, but his Hawaiian shirt and loud tie are mere window dressing. He's every bit as hard-assed as Mona, with a frightful, promiscuous intellect.

"She's the auteur of the Van Meegeren," I say. "It's not personal. She just wants every picosecond to bear her stamp."

"Come on. Done this for years. Seen every shot. No surprises; this thing's a milk run. She can't possibly be worried."

"Of course Mona is worried. With good reason," sez Bryant. "Fame takes work. A moment's inattention, you fall from grace. Who remembers Count Keyserling?"

I do, but I don't say anything.

"Only the encyclopedists and phantom historians." Bryant grins. "And the odd relic from the world before consensual digital stu-*podity*."

I have to laugh. "No bandwidth."

"Not for the tales of handmaids. Want to inhabit a future generation's mind, gotta really do something. Preferably salacious or exothermic." I mentally move actually *sending* Bryant one of our band's tunes up my list of things to do.

Count Keyserling suffered from melancholy and insomnia, so he commissioned Johann Sebastian Bach to create something soothing and lively, an engaging evening diversion. Emissary from Russia to the court of Saxony, the Count was eyeball-deep in intrigues and realpolitikal dark ops. No wonder he had trouble sleeping.

Keyserling's harpsichordist, a student of Bach's named Johann Goldberg, was to sit in the antechamber to the Count's bedroom and perform the work which eventually picked up his name — the *Goldberg Variations*. Goldberg's unenviable job: to reproduce Bach's genius nightly. Think of Goldberg as a protein-based MIDI box.

"And never mind recalling Keyserling, even the survival of the Goldbergs was a near thing," sez Bryant. "You have to remember a mere hundred-odd years ago, music could only be heard while it was being performed. This was not a canonical work — it was considered technically rococo and unremittingly cerebral. Unless you could play very well

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indeed, until 1934 when Wanda Landowska recorded them, the Goldbergs didn't exist. Full stop."

Variation 11

"Imagine, never hearing the Goldbergs?" Bryant shook his head, waved for another round. "That specter haunted Janacek, fueled some innate sense of loss: What else were we missing? It made him more radical, in its purest sense, in the sense of returning to the root. He became fascinated with the origins of recording and the possibility of recovering sounds from the past."

"He was wacko," sputters Davidson, spilling wine.

"Yes, but how archetypally Canadian: He became so radical that he reversed into a conservative, again in the truest sense, that of preserving, of retrieving, the past."

"Why?" I wondered.

"Oh, the usual," said Bryant, "Death. He'd been pretty deep into one of those phenethylamines, 2-C-T-8 — what do the kids call it these days?"

"Yond."

"Yeah. Let me spool you one from my private stock." Bryant fired a low-rez vid clip on his pod, Janacek sitting in a bar that looked a lot like the Cave.

"Can all this patterning just go to nothing?" said Janacek. There was a grunt that sounded like Bryant. I glanced over and he nodded. "The holoverse *is*," Janacek continued, slurring. "That patterning which makes the person exists *everywhere* in spacetime; the individual is merely the visible performance of that invisible score. Human life is a canon: Mind is the theme, and the populated world an incomprehensible six billion-part modulation with physical reality as the free bass line."

He stared into the camera, his pupils black basketballs. "You know, it's tantalizing," he said. "I feel I'm on the edge of something." The screen winked out.

"Edge was two steps back, dude," mutters Davidson.

"But he *was*." I know Davidson merely feigns this aloof hipness, but I want to punch through. "This was right before the Ur-recordings, right?"

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"You've anticipated my very point," sez Bryant.

Janacek had put major money into a U. Penn archaeology project; he'd coaxed and conned some of the best techs in the Biz to donate their time. In 2012, the team successfully played back the five thousand-year-old sounds of Sumer from thrown pottery, recordings made by sound waves impinging on the needle as the pot turned on the wheel. Took an almost unthinkable amount of filtering and amplification, to the point where some critics alleged this was more creation than transcription.

And yet, in those fragmentary recordings, there were recognizable sounds. Dogs barking, noises from streets of sun-baked brick just beyond the potter's room, and, even, a few fragments of ancient spoken Sumerian; a potter chanting tunelessly to the gods as she worked: "*Dingi' Pazuzu qatu Dingir Ishtar.*"

Janacek built a whole album, *e-Dubba*, riffing off that found audio. In liner notes that seemed to beg for the inevitable "crackpot" review, he said, "What is mind, but this same Sumerian clay, into which the world's impress is recorded? Thetic cognition is merely the laser, tracing the pits and lands; we are one-off glass masters, ready for duplication."

Made me think. Janecek's mind, spirit, is in some sense the inversion of his canonical performance of the Goldbergs. The score is just mute base-pairs; performance is the mirror-flesh of his mind.

The person creates the performance; can the performance create the person? There is some nontrivial sense in which Goldberg, in Keyserling's antechamber, is a musical Turing test: If Goldberg plays well, Keyserling should wonder: "Could it be that tonight Bach himself has dropped by to lull me to sleep?" If you can't tell the difference, is there a difference? *Hoc est corpus.*

Variation 12

"Harmonics are nontempered. We are harmonics, spirits thrown up by the resonance of flesh, matter plucked by energy, possessed by the fundamental frequency of the instrument. Each note, arrogant, imagines itself to be self-caused, *sui generis*. It has no history, no notion of its nascence, its way of coming to acoustic space."

— Liner notes to *e-Dubba*.

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"Equal temperament is a typical meat-assed solution," said Manny. This was one of the Manster's leitmotifs, and once he fired this subroutine, you had little choice but to take the ride. I was testing his solenoids, two hours until the second round started, so I just grunted noncommittally.

"A key's *true* intervals are based on harmonics, the vibrations of fractional lengths of its fundamental string. But that means an F relative to a C isn't the same as an F relative to a D. That's okay for one-key instruments, but in us keyboards, where the scale is modular and repeatable, my ancestors' Northern European artisans ran into tuning problems immediately."

I knew what was coming, with the same numbing certainty you have watching the first act of a tragedy. In case we humans missed it, here was our *hamartia*, from Manny's *unbiased* perspective.

"So they resorted to a purely arbitrary mathematical solution. Equal temperament."

"And why," I said with mock curiosity, "is that such a bad thing?"

"In their pornographic haste to cram every key into one box, they bashed each one until it fit. Instead of fractions of the fundamental, the ratio of each successive semitone's frequency increases by the twelfth root of two. Does that sound like a solution designed by nature? It makes all keys suboptimal. But prior to digital instruments, it was imposed by your Western scale and the physical realities of keyboard hardware."

I couldn't resist. "So it's not true for you, eh? But don't you strive to be an even-tempered instrument?"

"Mike, could you please stick your head really close to my soundboard for a second?"

"I'm human, but I'm not stupid."

"No, you're not. So why don't you get this? You've even played some of Bach's experiments."

It was true; I did have some of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* in my repertoire. "Too noodle-y for me."

"Exactly. That's Bach struggling to find each key's authentic sound. He was really a scientist; for him, it was about deriving complexity from first principles. Like Wolfram. That's why he was fascinated with canons. You know how hard they are to play; imagine how hard they are to write."

I didn't need to, having tried my hand at one or two in painstaking,

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laborious fashion. They made my thinker hurt. Even Janacek only wrote one that we know of, though he loved to play them. But that asymmetry was significant: With the right lens, you could see in Janacek's *oeuvre* the same clash of wills-again-won'ts generating Manny's temperament complaint.

Janacek was fundamentally bipolar: Part of him sought the intricacy of Bach's canonic work as the most extreme example of inventiveness within self-generated boundaries. Then there was that part of him that rebelled against all constraints — leveraging continuously shifting tones and self-interacting harmonics in an attempt to demolish even the notion of "note-ness." *E-Dubba* (especially my favorite cut, "*Zusammenstoß mit einem Rotwild*," Op. 313) made Xenakis's *Metastasis* sound like utter pedestrian clarity. Trying to listen to and make sense of those pieces is like being in a room full of poets shouting in different languages. You have this vague sense of tremendous meaning, you hear evocative assonances, but you struggle so much that you run out of neurotransmitters. And eventually, you pack it in and cue up some pop anthem to cleanse your palate.

Variation 13

I have warned you; I am not much of a narrator. I don't have the tools for putting these things together you can get in a cheap knockoff speakwriter. How the hell *did* people write before AI speech processors that automatically multi-threaded plotlines, managed story arc, inserted Propp-Campbell myth-points (and slyly masked cultural references), pinged a consensor net to ensure realtime believability, and, of course, managed product placement? Did they really — hard as it is to believe — just make it up as they went along?

Maybe they just wrote, ne? There was value in keyboard composition, a sense of technical proficiency the shallow speakwriters of the oral twenty-first century elide completely in their raw haste to produce.

Why allow something to come between the artist and the work, they say, as if this massive translation technology interposed between them and their own ideas was somehow natural, a perfect transcription.

Which is, of course, total gas. These tools are all written by programmers driven by frightful agendas: lobbying memos from marketing, quarterly marching orders from managers, apologetic memos from engineering VPs

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describing overblown promises made to analysts by desperate CEOs, pet peeves, side bets on Easter eggs, crank theories, smoldering resentment over midyear reviews, bad habits from college programming courses, and the numb, looming horror of fixed ship dates. It's a wonder *any* of this stuff works. Ever.

Variation 14

After last year's "celebratory" concert, we had the usual post-show party at Yoshiwara, down in the Flats. Crew and enders sorted stratigraphically along tables poised over the tanks of somnolent alligators. Occasionally, one of the drunker patrons would toss a bay scallop, just to see the bad boys leap, splashing unsuspecting neos with fetid gatorwater.

I usually see Mona from a distance; this time, she made a point of thanking all the crew individually. We were summoned over in groups of three to sit at the head table for a few minutes. Mona fixed us, one at a time, with her glassy, mechanical stare, and complimented us on our contributions. Her handshake — or, I guess, more accurately, her chair's — was firm and warm.

"Thank you for your excellent sound work, Mike. And especially for the fine job shepherding our friend Manuel; I know he can be a tricky fellow. Tonight's numbers were very good: We captured eight point one million device-seconds. We could not have done it without you."

I am absolutely certain that thirty seconds before, and thirty seconds after, she wouldn't have been able to pick me out of a lineup. Her chair pumped my name discreetly into her visual cortex. Not that I walk around with snoopy squidware running all the time.

Okay, so I do. How else do you know what's going on around you? If people don't have the sense to do a good job encrypting their interprocess traffic, hell, that's like talking in an elevator.

Variation 15

"Bach was the first master of sampling. Canons, in a sense, are an acoustic approximation of the delay loop. Imagine the compositional

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challenge of developing a melody in real time — an interesting one, not just a technical exercise — while playing, listening to, and riffing off a time-shifted doop. And Bach, according to reliable sources, could, off the top of his head, improvise mirror canons with free bass lines."

— Stefan Janacek,
Excelsis Über Bach

Luckily, despite my self-imposed handicap, my task is easier than creating fiction. All I have to do is recount things as they were — or seemed to me, anyway. But how do I know what is significant, what is insignificant? When you're talking about the appearance of a ghost, who knows what facts a supposed "Other World" takes into account? I strive for inclusivity rather than brevity. I have been told that I play piano like an engineer; I probably write like one as well.

There is, about the contestants, a common sense of anticipation and emptiness; despite well-honed performance personae, in some sense, they all have heads like blank media. Every year they come here, and I realize all over again that they are just kids, really; most teenagers, the rest still developmentally adolescent. Social misfits, chained to keyboards, with acne problems, arrested sexuality, feature length backlists of old comedy routines burned into long-term memory, obsolete tattoos, bedrooms plastered with fatally idiosyncratic icons, circles of friends who tolerate their clinging presence because it occasionally deters the wrath of vice-principals, fantasies of broad-spectrum competence, dates with some lower-case fan who will appear, not all that many years in the future, to lead them by their inevitably given hand into the slow suburban twilight of nameless streets that only feral dogs bark the winter endness of.

For the Preterite, it's just life in America.

They all dream of becoming the Elect — until they spend long enough in the City to realize that dreams don't come true. The culture protects itself from an excess of artists by throwing up filters: editors, critics, teachers, device logging, all the machineries of meritocratic Selektion. Someone needs to determine where the culture will invest its reproductive capital. ("Money's own genitals!" yelped Rilke, but we never learned who *he* was transcribing.)

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The downside, as always, is time lags, slippage, human error, and an inevitable overgating. Are a few false negatives too high a price to pay? Who knows. Not me. I'm only a sound engineer. I slip pads into lines all the time. Do the electrons hate me, for being frustrated in their upstream journey toward the Record Head?

B.A.U., little spinning charge dude. Get over it.

Variation 16

It was a bright, hot August afternoon, and upstairs in the gallery, the digital readout on the sound board was approaching thirteen hundred.

I had stumbled in to set up the equipment for the final eight rehearsal. I was on the backstage loop with Terry Garrison, who was prepping the sequencers with his real-time overlays. People no longer had the attention span to simply watch someone play excellent piano. Most, truth to tell, didn't even look at the live performer. Why would you, when you had a big-screen closeup surrounded by highlighted score, "correct" keys, pop-up notes, and respectful, situationally appropriate ads.

On one of the backstage cams, Friction Boy was talking earnestly with Mr. Costello. He'd been eliminated, but was lurking on his own dime. I pointed it out to Garrison; we'd both witnessed the conception of administrators before.

"Looks like we have a proto-Stork, inbound."

"That little pisher? His ass I will kick, if it isn't covered with Costello's spit."

"Negative. He saves that for the far-more-deserving f-holes of the military-entertainment complex."

"Good point."

Now, to mark the occasion, Mona made her grand entrance. For some, it was the first time seeing her up close, and she did nothing to relieve their anxiety as she kicked off the proceedings.

"Congratulations to all for having made it through the first rounds. You are now finalists, and tomorrow night, you'll have one *final* chance to demonstrate your skill and passion. I'll warn you now. It will not be easy."

"Don't make me listen to something unless it's worth my time."

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Mona was into her rant now, imprinting her brand of muscular encouragement on the massed contestants.

"You see this red light?" No dummies here; they all knew the score, nodded dutifully. "At the point where I stop listening, I will switch that light on. You are, of course, welcome to finish your piece for the rest of the audience; I'm just letting you know where you lost me."

The last was just for the record; nobody ever played into the red zone. Once the doom light came on, a last few notes would dribble out of slowing hands as the player, yanked back to the moment, racked focus to their fingers fluttering over that fantasy keyboard, lost now forever. Some never played again. Like they'd been switched off, they descended from that stage, Amtraked back to invisible origins, and became massage therapists, high-school math teachers, hydrogen station attendants.

Or sound engineers.

I judge things by their effects. What does that make me? A utilitarian, I guess.

I crave unhindered joy in art, hence the day job. I pick my gigs; I don't have to eat much crap since the board's in the balcony; and most of all, I don't depend on my band work earning out. Does that make me less of an artist cuz I don't just head-down go for it? Hang it all on the line, crash in SROs hoboing from town-to-town playing for drunken locals who just want to dress up and thrash? Slowly build a rep with the short work, dreaming of that album contract?

Is that what it takes to be an artist? Jink that hum. I see how crazy and stressed this Competition makes people. I keep hoping each year that I can make some difference, inject a few grace notes of sanity. But who knows?

Back down on the apron, Mona was still haranguing. What to my mind should have been allegro was a petty, *morbido* maze of stretti. She had wheeled over to Manny to illustrate some overdetermined point about motif lifts.

"Hey," said Garrison. "Can you tell your friend to toss in a few bad keys?"

"Hardly." I chuckled. "She'd just blame it on her chair."

"True. Specially since that's the one what's playing to begin with...."

The enders watched mutely, smart enough to know when to suffer in silence. These kids think they understand utilitarianism innately. Their

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lives, after all, are musical offerings for a putative greater good: Mona's winnowing to ensure survival of *Homo ludens*. But their understanding of the world has been shaped by the presuppositionless "now this"-ness of the Net. Everything to them is sequence; flipping through the world by remote control, reality is just one damned thing after another. Their narrated digital space is not a medium that promotes reflection or deductive logic. And their induction never pushes past vague first-order syntheses; they've been taught to distrust master narratives, and schemas, *res ipso loquitur*, are always tools of oppression.

No wonder they can't play Bach.

Variation 17

To indulge my atavistic fondness for typing, I throw a key overlay on Manny, a virtboard that uses fourteen keys divided into five positions. After the last warmup night, sitting down with the Yamaha BNF-12 polymer conditioning fluid and the Nibroc No-Dusst polishing cloth, I took a few minutes to key in some reflections on the evening, with Manny streaming the output back to my pod.

"Yo, Man. Key resistance one hundred, please."

"One hundred. What's on your mind tonight?"

"Saggin. Seein' these kids get sliced." My fingers began to meander up and down the length of the white keys, tuning in to their fretless alphabetic boundaries.

"Tonight's group? They were good, of course. But none of them were truly great. Are you distressed that they will shortly be confronted with their own limitations?"

"Nep, prox."

"Is it the way Mona does it?"

"Said."

"They came here voluntarily, asking for the judgment that Mona provides. Is she supposed to temper her evaluation, imperil the tenuous foothold this art form has on the public mind, just to boost their egos?" By now, my hands were warm; I responded digitally:

"I thought so once. As did once, clearly, Janacek. Now I am older and no longer so sure. It's easy, when one is young and sees a lot of oneself in

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the competitors, to feel for them, their lost dreams of success. Once one realizes that we are all already lost, beyond any hope of redemption, and that what drives *die Welt* is the senseless, arbitrary getting-on-ness that emerges from ego, power, and neurotic pride, one begins to have less sympathy for the doomed, even as one recognizes one's place among them."

"Mike?"

"Na?"

"You should ping your HMO about adjusting your medication."

Variation 18

> "All living things are, at base, inescapably canonical. Our genetic code is a four-note theme, repeated and modified, but always accompanied by its inverted counterpoint, each A to a T, each C to a G. And the letimotivic proteins spun off this canon — the stuff of which is the flesh that sings — can it help but echo the Voice of its creator?"
>
> — Stefan Janacek
> *Within the Canon*

Janacek's mother died when he was twelve. His father, a minor government official in Winnipeg and an amateur pianist, became a somber, withdrawn man dedicated almost totally to his son's (by then considerable) success. When his father committed suicide, five days before the 16th Van Meegeren, there was never any doubt that Janacek would perform. He would, he did, and the rest is history.

But the backstory — Bryant's "epiphenomenon" — is at least as compelling as the public success. Those last nights of the Competition, legend has it he visited every room, on both sides of the hall, down the length of the dorm. The night before the finals, the hallcam records the enders in a bedsheet-togaed conga line winding from bathroom to lounge, led by a garlanded Janacek, chanting, "Don't just change state, trans-substantiate!" Good-natured drunken hedonism of the Bacchic variety, with the denouement a sangria-assisted *ménage à tout* in the lounge.

Purple stains, crusty patches on the furniture, and an underground classic MP5.

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While Mona could not have been ignorant of this, it seems likely in retrospect that she chose to perceive not a pattern but an aberration; a chance combination of stresses.

Janacek once said in an interview, "I did not enter puberty until I was nineteen."

Variation 19

I grew up believing in what the Roman Catholic Church calls transubstantiation. During Mass, at the moment the priest utters The Words, bread and wine literally become Body and Blood. This is no metaphor; this is a last vestige of ancient magic. Janacek, in addition to being Canadian, was also raised Catholic. And one can see, particularly in his later maunderings, his attempt to write the miraculous into the mindspace of the twenty-first century's sere rationalism. He saw it as a simple problem of transcription.

Arrangers do it all the time. You have a piece written for piano, and you need to score it for guitar. Such versions — called transcriptions — are part translation and part composition. Each instrument has its own unique modalities, and the challenge is to find a way to allow the essence of the piece to assert itself. Janacek must have been keenly aware of the resonance between the perennial philosophy and the *Goldbergs*, themselves of necessity a transcription.

We no longer have the original instrument, the cembalo or harpsichord, a two-manual precursor of the modern piano; you could play, on those parallel keyboards, things that are literally impossible to reenact on modern instruments. Considering the amount of time during the *Goldbergs* that one has to deploy crossed-hand technique, it is obvious.

I do know something about two-manual keyboards; I was, for a while, a very amateur church organist. The St. Jerome parish church in Brooklyn, where my mother and I went, had a choir loft with an ancient air-driven pipe organ.

At one end of the loft, a sound-deadening room held an enormous fan box; a big — wooden — mechanical enclosure, leading to a squiddy nightmare of ducts that fed three tiers of pipes. They loomed over the creaky wooden console centered amid choir risers, facing the rear of the

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church. Two manuals, a row of tabs, a handful of clunky, hardware radio-button presets, and a full, walk-on spread of pedals.

Mine was probably the last generation that showed any interest in religion or classical music in that neighborhood — East Flatbush in the 1990s was a noisy stretto of drugs and aimless violence. The music outside our small, neat house on Avenue D was a mélange of Caribbean rhythm and urban sampling.

The loft was an anti-environment. A voyeuristic aerie above and behind the congregation; a space of difference and quiet, reflection, solitude. The old organist sensed a kindred spirit, a protégé, perhaps, but in any event, someone to play the five o'clock mass on Saturdays and give him the night off.

He tutored me in sight reading and pedalwork, coached me through an antique green hymnal, and turned me loose on the massive bugger in the loft. I still have the — metal — key for that door, and shake my head in amazement that they let me go up there of an afternoon and inflict Bach's *Kunst der Fugue* on the handful of social security widows muttering through Friday's Sorrowful Mysteries.

Variation 20

Later those Friday nights in our cinderblock garage, my first band and I, stoked on rock and Olde English, would pin the needle. We started out as badass rappers; did a few gigs at parties in the Vanderveer Estates, clubs on Church Ave, the kinds of places you always wore Kevlar. Big bass and thug puffery, until the night this old guy — seemed old to us, in retrospect, he was probably all of thirty — stuck his head in the garage, offered to sit in on drums and show us some authentic Jamaican grooves.

Righteous herb and the thrill of losing yourself in the rhythm were the best evangelists authentic music has ever had; we abandoned sampling and never looked back. There was something about the music itself that led us on, turned us all into musicians as we went our separate ways.

There was a time I even played a little piano, here and there. But I know my limitations. Not the kids left in Michelsen.

They all dream of Making It, going to The Big Town. Despite decentering technology, there remains this fantasy of place, of connection, of salvation

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in a numinous Somewhere — a hazy future of trains from their high-school tank towns out into the Emerald City of America, Inc.

Not for me; I grew up in the Apple. New York is an asphalt heat trap, an inescapable basin of attraction, kept perpetually at the event horizon of total destruction only through continual corruption of endless generations of kids from the boroughs and Midwest bus-station refugees, off on the Deuce, lost in the glare.

They never imagine the desolation of everyday life behind the mute portcullises of those twentieth-century brick-facade apartment houses. And that world inside — oh, read it: endless stories of heartbreak and loss; news crews grabbing close-ups of shell casings, cops tapping on doors with bad news, teenagers sequestered in closet-sized bedrooms fronting airshafts, listening to mind warping music on cheap headphones and dreaming only of taking over the living room. Hanging out in the cemetery on weekends, until that twisted night when someone managed, improbably, to get the backhoe started, and we dug up Gil Hodges. I *really* don't wanna talk about it.

Variation 21

> "We attract the hungry ghosts because of synecdochic patterning reminiscent of some Golden Age, something lost. Why else would they ride us at this time and place? Like centaurs smelling wine, these *soi-disant* gods catch the reek of burnt offerings and crowd into our heads. We are infinitely complex self-modifying themes, capable of containing multitudes."
>
> — Stefan Janacek, quoted in
> *Private Minds, Crazy Thoughts*

"I wasn't fully conscious yet," sez Manny, "I remember it the way you probably remember your childhood — through a layer of scratched polycarbonate, microstressed to milky opacity." I've heard the story before, but I never tire of listening to Manny tell it. Manny who was there, that last night of Janacek's life; Manny who Janacek touched. When we get down toward finals every year, I ask him to speak it again, as a way of likening ancient times to modern.

"Stefan was very, very drunk. Too drunk to attempt anything like the

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Goldbergs. He sat down, with a bottle — a few cc's remaining from a liter of Grey Goose. And he couldn't play three notes in sequence. He laid his head and arms down on my keyboard, and just cried, great serial, seizural sobs, two forearms worth of dissonance."

That's the part that sends the hackles up my neck. The notion that I am touching the same keyboard, that beneath my fingers is some of Janacek's sweat, his tears, his DNA. Magical thinking, sure, that something of him remains in this pAIno, and, through it, I can touch him. (Also, perhaps, that through it, he can touch me....)

"He cried himself out. I think in some quite literal sense, he cried himself into a space where he couldn't continue, where something that was deeply intertwined in his pattern just gave.

"And his head came up; still drunk, weaving, but his hands were running on their own now, not under the control of anything north of the medulla, and he stared off into the wings and began to play the *Goldbergs*."

"And it was like he'd never played it before. I knew his touch, inflection, sostenuto. This was not it. This was like something in the music speaking through him; playing him as he was playing me. You've heard it. It's like listening to how Bach himself might have done it for his student. And one must imagine, hearing it, how Goldberg would have felt after that, those evenings in Count Keyserling's antechamber: playing the variations, and yes, feeling them, animating them, playing them well and truly — but at once remembering how they sounded under the Hand of the Master. That particular diplopia of playing and yet entertaining the fantasy of being played.

"It was so far beyond anything that had ever been done, was such a flat-out wail, that there was nothing left; no place left to go. Once you've unpacked the fractal density of the *Goldbergs*, what remains? The next morning, he was dead, and Mona lay paralyzed."

It was an unutterably Hollywood beat: transcendence and death. Almost immediately, the mystic haze began to form around the "mad genius possessed by Bach." The Biz tried to throw him up the charts: cable movie, ersatz-classical pop themes, softheaded spiritualism. Flacks spun conspiracy theories of a faked suicide; sleazehounds ran ghost-tours of the Play House to pick up lingering vibrations. Hard to tell the agented gas from the slow, grassroots faith, but a flickering subliminal consensus

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developed that someday, at this magical keyboard where he'd spun agony into gold, he would return.

Me, I didn't believe any of that crap. Until tonight.

Variation 22

At eight o'clock sharp, the house lights went down, the videoscrim fired up with the intro segment, and the final night of the competition got under way. Mr. Costello did his turn and ceremoniously whisked the curtain open. It had begun.

The first contestant, a seventeen-year-old Khalistani boy who'd been trembling backstage like a badly tuned combustion engine, made it all of about twelve bars into his piece, one of those angular Mahler abstractions. Mona's robotic right hand slapped down on her keypad and the big red light came on. His fingers slowed, stopped, vibrated over the keys.

"I have heard better articulation from a rubber chew toy. Don't waste my time!" Her voice boomed from everywhere. "Next."

He stood up, managed a dip at the audience (Props fired the sign, back of Mona in the pit, that said "BOW") and stumbled offstage into his parents' arms. The truly scary part was when he came offstage, gonged twenty-two seconds into one of the finest performances of his young life, he was saying, "Oh, that's okay. That's just what my teacher did back home to prepare me for this. I was expecting her to cut me off. No, no, it's okay." Then he wandered off back behind the scrim, vomited, and collapsed in a sobbing heap.

You grow accustomed to that sort of thing. We have one union hand whose only job is to crisscross backstage with a bucket of pungent green cedar sawdust, for just such receptions of the dharma.

"Young cowgirl, allow me to introduce you. That, dear, is a *piano*. Have you ever played one before? Because you are treating it as if it is a steer to be roped and branded. Might I suggest that you retire to the wings and have one of the stagehands *hose you down*?" Mona had slapped down the second entrant about a minute and a half in. Just long enough for the young woman, a Juilliard graduate who was running in front of the pack in the backstage betting, to begin to hit her stride. The woman had been down in the groove on a tricky passage in Moszkowski's Op. 24, and it took

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a second for her to come back to the here and now. Walking offstage, she had the look in her eye that makes hands mentally note the location of the first-aid kits.

"Tough house tonight," I said to Manny.

"You know there are no truly random sequences. The likely candidates are last; she's just adding torque." We were adjusting legs and action for the next contestant, the Japanese kid. This is the part of the job that really chews me up. When we get to finals, I dissociate like a cop at a multiple decap MVA. No human beings here, just congealed fluids and cold cuts: tag 'em and bag 'em.

And it would work. Except that, effing idiot that I am, I deliberately go out of my way to get to know the contestants.

Variation 23

Listen up, rombies, as we flash back to last night. At the end of the Michelsen hallway, newly minted finalist Jamie Sheldon, still in her eveningwear, hunched at the window staring out at the lights of the city and sobbing softly. Cleveland has that effect on people, occasionally, but I didn't think that was the etiology here. Survivor guilt?

"Hey, hey, hey...," I said. "Why sagging?" Proffered a flight of Kleenex; always pack 'em this time of year.

She looked up, recognized me.

"Oh, hi, Mike. Just watching the steel Twinkies of death." She turned away, honked, sniffled. Just past the Quad, a gleaming bullet train rumbled by. Not noticeably Twinkie-like, but hey, enders hoick themselves into some odd mental configurations. Look, listen, live.

"Drink?" I offered her the oilcan of Foster's I'd been working.

"Thanks." She took a long pull.

"Hey, mate," said the can, "Why not buy this young lady her own life-size helping of crisp Aussie satisfaction?"

She stared numbly, shook her head. "Could I have a hug?"

"Sure." I set down the can, held her through a round of shivers, then she shook me off.

"You probably see this every year," she said, dabbing at her eyes, blotting liner and mascara into a smeary raccoon *grisaille*.

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I retrieved the big can, swirled beer. "Yah, B.A.U., I'm afraid."

"As usual, *klar*." A grimace. "And Mona *is* the business." She sniffed, shook her head, picked a link. "Never thought I'd get to meet the devil."

"They say every devil is just a god you haven't learned to understand."

"*They* would say that." Was there the ghost of a smile?

"If Mona's the devil in the pit, what does that make you up on the stage?" You don't gotta be a speakwriter to sense an opportunity for overdetermined insight.

"A poor player strutting and fretting." Puked it right back, rebutting with Janacek's own words. She looked out at the sky, layered with scudding underlit clouds. Sighed. "I don't know how I can play tomorrow."

So it's *those* steel Twinkies.

"After all you've been through, what could tomorrow frighten you with?" I say this at least once a year. Works about half the time.

She studied the tips of her fingers. Rippled them. "When I came here, I felt like I had something. Was something...capable...equal to reality." She wiped palms on thighs, stared at the backs of her hands, digits fanned in gracile nine-key splays. "Expected this to be the...*culminant* moment I dreamed of since I was five. I was gonna do my Webern piece if I made the finals. But why bother? I should just hammer out six bars of spudbrained *Moonlight Sonata* and get it over with."

I didn't know what to say. "I wish you felt like you could do what you thought was your best."

"*Klar*," she leaned her head back against the wall, and closed her eyes. "*Klar*. Me too."

Variation 24

"Given the evolution of media, it is likely, if not inevitable, that technologies will be developed for recording and remote reception of the experiences of others. Would such inner audiences, do you think, remain entirely quiet and passive, or might one hear the occasional rustle of a program, a cough, a whispered remark?"

— Stefan Janacek, "Technologically Induced Bicamerality as a Model for Schizophrenia"

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"Mr. Lemieux. What you are doing is not performance. It does not even approach the coherence of a finger exercise. What I am hearing most closely approximates a slaughtered animal's pithed galvanic twitching." Down went the French finalist. We were looking at the last four contestants now. If things kept up at this pace, we'd be out of here before we were scheduled to break for an intermission. I could hear the crowd begin to mutter; whispers to pods to move up dinner reservations, security rendezvous, highly coded assignations.

The evening had started with our usual ritual. Bryant, prowling around backstage, uttered the magic words when the houselights went down.

"This is no game," sez Bryant.

"This is no fun," replies Manny, by rote.

"Your life is flame," rumbles Garrison.

"Your time...is come," I say. And right on the beat, lights up and audio in. We'd been doing this for years, in vain performative re-enactment of the one time that it was different.

The night Janacek died — the night of the finals, nine years ago — he had done the unthinkable. He conspired with the enders to insert an unscheduled musical number, which he'd written specifically for the occasion. It was his first, and last, canon. And when he led the contestants out at the top of the show to stand around the piano and sing, no one in the audience — and certainly not Mona — had any thought but that this was to be a pleasant little bonus track, a Janacek confection to set the evening's high tone.

What followed, while it brought amazed smiles to the faces of many, serves now, years later, as a grim reminder of the dangers of parody:

Dux (Janacek)	*Comes* (Contestants)	Free bass ("Mona," voiced by Manny)
You've a hankering to write		We come to hear, hear
First a melody that's tight.	Writing would be a delight	hear,
	If we can finish it tonight.	And to weigh, weigh, weigh.

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Then a method for combining
Such a tune with its entwining

Permut-ed instantiation
Or temporal dislocation.

It's a challenge that would tax
All but progeny of Bach's.

And a chance most opportuna
At the wheel of ol' *fortuna*.

There's no better way to find
That transcendent inner mind

If you can truly write a canon...

Your locked up meaning earns its freedom.

And if clipping it to terseness
Helps avoid the grim perverseness

Of a judgment that is meted
Ere our seat is even heated

Or our fingers set to flexing under tricky etudes vexing.

If the act of cranking meter gives the slightest chance to beat her;

Should a canon get us going,
Let's compose one without slowing.

We might attain something enormous —

We just might finish a performance!

Muster from your souls, souls, souls,
The best that you can play, play, play.
Beauty blooms,

From the iron jaws of rust.

Minerva's owl flies,

Only from the House of Dust.

Bring the score's hidden mind to life;
That's the boon that must be won.

Stretch the shadow of your fame
Across the surface of the sun

This is no game.
This is no fun.
Your life is flame.
Your time is come.
You take the stage,
And...you...
Are...
Done.

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Watch the vid-yourself, it's worth it. There's a moment of gape-jawed silence, then roars of laughter mixed with indignant rhubarb. The *polloi* in the cheap seats upstairs actually begin winging wadded programs at the stage. If you know just where to look, and you have a full-rez doop, you can spot a beat, quite clearly, where Mona in the orchestra and Janacek on stage make eye contact. And though the sound is buried under the crowd, you can see her, slowly and deliberately, mash the red button before she turns on her heel and storms out of the pit.

Variation 25

Friday afternoon with the final eight, I take on my yearly role of historian and hagiographer, load up the Play House van, and haul the enders out to Collinwood, to the railroad tracks where Janacek delivered his final variation.

We arrive in sweltering humidity, just pre-thunderstorm, and Garrison climbs on the roof of the van to grab establishing shots and capture cutaways of fortuitous sundogs.

Ahead of us is the crossing. Heat haze shimmers over steel and clinkers as I walk the group across the ancient asphalt. Past the gate to the right, just below grade, is the ever-present memorial shrine of flowers, notes, votive candles, stuffed animals, sheet music, and disposable casters pumping tinny, criminally amateur homages.

The delicate enders grimace and thumb on filters. I let them soak up the sunbaked desolation soundless for a minute before suggesting they take the municipal frequency. In a rare act of intelligence — or indecision — Cleveland's arts council has resisted the urge to either commission or narrate. Instead, the location loop provides only the unadorned official record of the events from the National Transportation Safety Board.

Yes, as far back as 2014, cars had voice recorders — as well as interlocks preventing operation by the chemically impaired. Unfortunately, the non-invasive technique automakers offered in high-end models involved a dexterity test on the touchscreen, something that posed no challenge for Janacek even well above legal limit. The NTSB noted this in their report — which had nothing to do with Janacek or Tzedak; it was just another disturbing data point on grade crossings in the higher rail-traffic world of the teens. According to the Vehicle Data Recorder, speed was

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forty-eight mph, no braking or evasive steering was evident, and the audio system was accessing Glenn Gould's 1955 *Goldberg Variations*; impact occurred 4:42 into Variation 25.

The enders tune in. I, in keeping with my anachronist tendencies, choose to read along on-screen:

NTSB RAR-14/28/SUM Collision of southbound Amtrak train 3126, the Acela Lakeshore, and passenger vehicle, August 8, 2014.

TRANSCRIPT

Fairchild CVA-120, with a 2-minute loop. Recording picks up at 6:38 EDT.

LEGEND

DM Driver side microphone (Janacek)

PM Passenger side microphone (Tzedak)

INT Internal guidance and systems computer

TRF-1 Traffic net automated system

TRF-2 Traffic net human operator

@ Non-pertinent word(s)

* Unintelligble word

Expletive(s)

() Questionable insertion

1837.51 DM	* I don't even touch the keyboard.
1837.52 TRF-1	Advisory. 9,000 feet ahead, railroad crossing yellow.
1837.56 PM	What do you want me to say? (sound similar to pounding on steering wheel)
1838.13 DM	That it...that all of it...makes a # difference.
1838.26 PM	A difference, eh? For someone else, ne? So it's not your awful, deeply felt choice?
1838.32 DM	Choice? I've never had choice. You have to be conscious to make choices. I've only ever been alive at the keyboard. Now I'm not even a musician anymore, I'm a # administrator.
1838.50 TRF-1	Alert. 4,000 feet ahead, railroad crossing red.
1839.55 PM	And was your little cantata this evening supposed to prove otherwise? Not very convincing. I suppose it earned you enough style points for an evening of # @. If you can't be a musician, at least you can # one.
1839.16 DM	#, you #. @.

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1839.20 PM	You were made for something different. So are the ones we look for, the true instruments.
1839.20 INT	Caution. Railroad crossing. Braking recommended.
1839.26 DM	Made for, or made *into*. Suckered, euchred, koshered, cashiered, gornish mit gornish, *nyet khoroshi.*
1839.32 TRF-1	Alert. Alert. Brake now.
1839.35 PM	Stefan. Stop.
1839.36 DM	#. Why? This is all just polygons.
1839.38 PM	Stefan. Stop! Stop now!
1839.38 INT	Collision warning. Braking now.
1839.39 DM	Emergency override.
1839.41 INT	Override. Traffic control notified.
1839.41 PM	What the # are you doing?
1839.42 TRF-1	Collision imminent. Brake now.
1839.43 DM	(Laughter) Don't worry. You're re-entrant.
1839.46 PM	Stefan...Stefan!
1939.46 TRF-2	Stefan Janacek? Reverse! Move your vehicle now!
1839.47 DM	We...
1839.47 PM	Stefan...
1839.48 INT	Door open. Warning. Door...
1839.48 DM	...are really...
1839.49 PM	#
1839.50 DM	...dead.
1839.50	SOUND OF IMPACT

Mona only managed to get halfway out. The locomotive struck just aft of the front-left wheel well, and spun the car into a side-impact that killed Janacek instantly. Dragged for twenty feet, the car then rolled off down an embankment. Unbelted, Mona sustained a burst fracture of her fifth cervical vertebra before being ejected, the car coming to rest on her right arm. Only TrafficNet's anticipatory deployment of rescue services saved her life; they were on scene within two minutes of impact, and had her intubated before anoxia set in.

Before I rustle the kids back on the van, I take a moment to watch them at The Scene. They shuffle in slow arcs, staring at the mute steel, and I eavesdrop on the soundtracks they're all composing. The tonic Western genius and the meandering counterpoint critic, noodling their way into a big dissonant

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bustup with kettledrums. What a motif: "We are really dead." Man, he almost made it. But of course, we have all his recordings; and we have Mona.

Variation 26

It was, typically, Bryant who had the premonition. The last contestant of the night, Charles Johnson, was walking nervously back and forth, offstage right.

"I've got a feeling about him," said Bryant. "Been chatting with him last couple of days. Not just good technique, he's done the headwork. Talks like he was dipped in Janacek."

Can't say I was paying attention. Jamie Sheldon had just sat down, taken a deep breath, and begun to play. I was trying really hard not to get my hopes up. When she kicked off, I relaxed and smiled: Webern. At least if she was going to get beat, she was going to get beat on her best pitch.

She played for about two minutes, which was really quite good, and didn't seem surprised at all when the inevitable red light came on.

A screaming came across the pit — it has been happening all evening, but that was nothing compared to now.

"This is a disgrace to the memory of those who made this competition. Are your hands connected *in any way* to your brain? Why are you bothering with the piano? Why don't you try playing something you're more suited for, like a *spatula!*"

It would be a pleasant fantasy to think that Mona reserved her harshest criticism for those who came closest, not just those whose Icarian arcs ended merely in Auden's mundane despair. If true, invective throughput alone would have marked Jamie as one of the Chosen. In reality, however, it was likely just the miserable disappointment of someone who didn't want to do this again and was hoping to find one last Big Name so they could quit a winner.

I was bummed for Jamie. Mona's tirade continued as she scooted back the bench, executed a short, professional bow, and set a measured pace to the security of the wings. Her shoulders slumped as she passed the sound cam, and there were tears in her eyes, but she managed a smile before meandering off to sit crosslegged in the shadows back of the cyc.

Even before she lost her arm, Mona had employed a no-nonsense,

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cut-'em-off approach. But I think I know the flexpoint, the moment in which began her descent into the maelstrom of vitriol.

There is, in the archives, a bit of documentary material which teases with the promise of an answer. The proto-Manny's incessant digital recorder was running when Mona and Stefan had a *tête à tête* following the "canon" insurrection. Only a few insiders have access, and I was not privileged to be one of those. But I had asked Manny about it.

"Yo, Man. You're hooked to the archives. Can you plate it?"

An unusually long pause.

"Interesting," Manny said. "No."

"You can't grab it?"

"I can access it and play the file internally. However, it has been digitally watermarked to prevent copying, transcoding, and audible output. The lock is quite secure."

"But you heard it?"

"Yes."

"And you can't just replay it?"

"Mike, can you please play a C4 and C88 simultaneously with the fingers of one hand?"

"Can't reach."

"But you can see the keys, can you not? And you can play them one at a time?"

"Clued. Hardware limit. But can you speak the story?"

"Now that," said Manny, "I can do." He paused for effect. "It was a dark and stormy night...." He endured my eyeball roll for a few tenths of a second, then flapped the keyboard to get my attention. "I *know* you human speakwriters are inordinately fond of the pathetic fallacy. Don't tug me; I parse the *New York Times* every stonking day. If it's too stiff for you, virtboy...."

"Heard, heard. Mute on." When Manny descends to street jive, it signals major pissitude; I shut up.

Variation 27

"I'm expecting an explanation," said Mona.

There was a pause.

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"You're expecting an explanation?"

Steady rain drummed on the roof of the flyspace; Mona sat in the stage manager's chair, wheeled next to the grand parked down stage center, in dim worklight. Janacek, on the bench, fanned idle arpeggios, *allargando*, under her fulminating glare.

"I would like to hear your rationale for why you ruined the competition, screwed up these kids, and humiliated me with that little stunt this evening."

"Mona, I'm sorry if that's the way you see it. This was not meant to humiliate you; and as for ruining the competition...."

"You led eight promising artists out here to thumb their noses at me, and you don't see the damage that did?"

"We were 'thumbing our noses' at the structure, at the rules; at the idea of competition, of judgment. Not you. These are kids. They're fragile; they deserve to be encouraged, not judged."

"How many pianists have you taught?"

"Mona, I've taught hundreds of...."

"Not students. Pianists."

"Oh." Pause. "One."

"One. Yes, that Belgian harpsichordist. I've been doing this for forty years; in that time, I have found, selected, polished, and launched more than fifty. Don't you think I know what I'm doing?"

"Times have changed, Mona," he said, turning back to finger silently at the keyboard. "The classical labels are gone. The performance circuit is hosed; these kids aren't going to have a place to play out every month; even if they do, how many will show up to listen? And where could they go from there anyway? The mass audience has been completely polluted by interactive pop and watered-down eye-candy visualizations. Who's going to buy true hard-classical keyboard art?"

"So, they should just give up? We should encourage them to be mediocre?"

"No, no, not give up. Find their niche. Find a local audience, build a listenership, focus on their sound, their unique style. Accept that while there will be limits to their impact, their so-called fame, they can still find meaning in performing. But that means that they have to find performance satisfying; not a fearful submission to final judgment."

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"The problem with youth – and yes, Stefan, despite your physical years, your *arrested* social development makes you a *youth* – is that you do not have the life experiences to understand how the world really works. You think you do, and you think you understand when older people say things. But you live in a different universe, where things *mean* differently, and it is impossible for those with more insight to really communicate with you. Your observations are correct, of course; I've seen all these things. And they are also *trivial*. What you imagine to be essential and profound is only the merest surface; another time around the wheel."

"When you're older, you'll understand, eh?"

"Can a ten-year-old, no matter how technically proficient, truly play the *Goldbergs*?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"There are stylistic choices that go beyond simply reproducing the notes on the page. Kids that young just don't have the time in their skins."

"Nor do you."

"Mona. Take a look around you. I can read reality."

"You read a surface reality, of obvious processes, with visible demons. True, there is no audience right now. And yes, the technology has made it possible for the merely proficient to develop vanity followings. And there has been a healthy cultural backlash against abstruse talent, as your *Outsidistas* and neo-Cagists would have it."

"Not *mine*."

"Your unwitting allies, then."

"Mona, it's the way the world is."

"Right now. But do you imagine the next variation will have the same tempo? The *Goldbergs* were unknown from 1750 until 1930 — no playback technology, successive waves of critical indifference. But once rediscovered, Bach's genius reanimated whole new generations of minds. Why should our ambition...."

"*Your* ambition."

"Will you listen instead of reacting? Should *our* aspiration for these young artists be any less than to create a greatness that can endure such dark gaps?"

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There was a pause, Janacek idly fingered "Kraut and Ruben" from Variation 30.

"You always did like Aeschylus more than Euripides."

Mona's face gathered for a bellow, but she paused, set her lips, and replied in a measured tone. "Stefan, you play like an angel, but you have no idea how much damage you truly have done."

With more resignation than anger, she shook her head and walked slowly across the raised pit floor and down the service steps to the house. All the way up the raked auditorium, she was accompanied by the measured pace of the Aria, clearly *da capo.*

Barely audible on the house mike — so faint that it might have eluded all but the most attentive — Mona whispered, "If I have too austerely punished you, your compensation makes amends."

Variation 28

"Ufa. Said for true?"

"Probably," said Manny. "But only approximately. I've never experienced this before — something you must run into all the time with wetware memory — without access to the original, I must rely on my temporary, idiosyncratic, internal reconstruction of the events."

"Can't you listen to it again?"

"Yah. But with the transcode lock, I can't doop to short-term memory. It goes, how you say, 'right out of my head.'"

"Hunh. That sags."

"For the last time! I don't want to *hear* any *more* of these *finger exercises!*" The penultimate contestant was yanked reeling off the stage. I want to say that I thought she looked, sitting there on the orchestra riser, eye-lens whirring as it zoomed and racked focus, like the Queen of some sunken continent; bitter that the magic to make her rise again was lost — had been destroyed by her own hands.

The evening's final hope, Charles Johnson, looking very small under a roomful of eyes, had begun that long, long walk from the wings to the keyboard. "This kid's a certified prodigy," Bryant was nattering in my ear. "But a real recluse. Since he took the silver in Warsaw, he's dropped out of sight; no gigs, no recordings. I gotta wonder if that's just

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cagey management, or some authentic side-effect of genius."

"Hm." I was busy punching up preferences on Manny; Johnson played all the way up the keys, and we needed to retract the fallboard.

"Excuse me...," said Johnson. This wasn't rehearsed. I spun one of the pit mikes to cover him. Probably dedicating the performance, I thought; I was wrong.

"I'd like to depart from the number I have listed in the program. With your permission, Madame Tzedak, I should like to assert the prerogative granted in Rule Eleven and perform Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations*."

"Well, well! This ought to be tasty." Bryant began muttering whatever magic syllables alerted those Biz-folks who needed to be first-movers, yanking people on both coasts out of their primetime softcore Net cheese.

"You wish to perform the *Goldbergs*?" Tzedak's voice was soft, but I knew from experience it was the softness that was usually precursor to one of her *grand mal* wraths.

"Yes, if it would please you."

"I would be pleased to hear you attempt it."

Suddenly, the headphone loop was full of Terry Garrison, whooping it up. "Yeeee-hah! Saddle up a bomb, kiddo, we're going to hell!"

Variation 29

Johnson slipped into the opening aria with a deft, delicate weave of finger moves. Smooth and powerful. None of the lurching staccato most amateurs suffer trying to capture Bach's soft, stretched time. By the time he got to the full two-handed chord in measure twenty-eight, there was a noticeable rustling in the house. You were hearing things in the music; premonitory things.

He paused for a long, long beat at the end of the Aria. Tzedak was frozen: stark, staring, frozen, in her seat.

Johnson exploded into the thematic lightning runs of the first variation. And it was now clear that we were in the presence of genius. Both hands flying; trilling, melodies interpenetrating. The audience seemed to have stopped breathing; I couldn't tell whether they were watching

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Johnson or Mona. Probably both. Her right arm wasn't moving anywhere near the button, though. She was hooked.

The shifting confluences of the second variation, long-term note-points intercut almost impossibly with second- , and even third-level melodies, man, this kid had them all happening, eleventeen balls in the air, all at once. He was better than the best pianists I had ever heard in all my years at the Competition. He was certainly a hell of a lot better than he'd been in rehearsal. Maybe too much better. Maybe, I began to think, there really *was* something to all that Janacek talk.

Variation three begins the tortuous escalation of canons that forms the nucleus, the spine around which the *Goldberg*s cohere. Johnson's right hand whipped through the impossibly frenzied duplication, as the left chewed through Bach's twisted inversions. This was already the best piano solo I'd ever heard. Bryant had tapped the board feed, and was pumping it live to whoever he had online. I could only imagine what it would be like, dripping wet from the pool, out on the Coast, immobilized by this buzzsaw rendition of the capstone of the Western sequence. I hoped they were bleeding from the ears up in Topanga.

Johnson handled all the gear shifts, up and down, through the rest of the early variations. The acid test is being able to hear, in each, the opening aria's subtle line fractally expanded. It is not just virtuosity, it is a matter of soul, of spirit. You have to feel the desire in that aria, its desire to become something beyond itself. What was likely, even at the hands of Goldberg, just another etude was now animated, extruded in all dimensions, until it became about how music exists, how it inhabits us, and how we, as seers and explorers in this forest of imbrication, learn to discover the unending levels and layers of our own, variationed selves. This kid wailed.

He played without repeats until he got to 14, which he did as AA-B.

By the time he reached the buildup of Variation 26, he was more than fifteen minutes into performance. The longest time anyone had played at the Competition in nine years. Reporters had begun to drift forward with cams. It seemed possible — how could it be? unprecedented! — that he might actually *finish* a piece; there might actually be a complete performance. This was not only amazing; in some ways, it was genuinely, viscerally terrifying.

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The rousing vigor of Variation 29 drew to a close. A moment of silence, all eyes on Mona's right arm. Then the majestic Quodlibet of Variation 30 began, unimpeded.

Variation 30

"Yeee-hah! Stacka stacka stacka!" Garrison was floating cams at all angles around Manny, twirling zoom controllers and cutting bang on the beat, all the while raving maniacally. Bryant stood, deathly still and intently staring from just behind the teaser, his eyes only on Johnson's fingers.

Johnson was romping like a monster through the cheery folktune overlays of 30. *Romping.* I had never heard anything like it. Not ever. Not like this. All I could see on stage was the back of his body, hands flying like undercranked special effects. Garrison had enormous closeups on the screen, fingers mere motion blurs.

"Are you hearing this? It's *like* Janacek...," Bryant muttered in my ear, "But it's...this...*this* is *wicked stiff!*"

I pulled off the cans and ran my fingers around behind my ears. I had hit bumps, musician's gooseflesh, real bad, all over the backs of my arms and my neck.

Johnson reached the end of Variation 30, paused for a moment before jumping on the reconfigured theme.

Then he just stopped.

Stopped dead.

Stood up.

Smiled down at Tzedak.

And man, it was not that kid's face. It was effing eerie. I was looking at him, but beyond his eyes, I could almost see something else looking out *through* him.

He took one step forward, stopped, and his gaze swept across the audience, still shocked into silence. Later, when they'd hauled him offstage, he would once again be just a twitching, diaphoretic teenager. At that moment, however, he was the spirit of Janacek himself. He looked about nineteen feet tall, and when he bowed, it was with a grace born of age, flesh singing on the bones, inhabited by a spirit from another place and time. There was no doubt.

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And when he delivered the final variation, there could be no doubt in Tzedak's mind either. He bowed to the audience, and then turned, upstage, and bowed to Manny.

"Continue!" Mona commanded. A long pause, then she tried again. "You may...*continue.*" This time her voice cracked.

He turned, slowly, brought his right arm up, hand like a claw next to his face, and hissed.

She wheeled toward the stage and, as if on cue, the pit began to rise. Garrison had two cams orbiting, slowly...slowly, and close-ups on her face and right hand. Johnson — to see him, haloed and backlit on the videoscrim was to see, instead, Janacek — stood at the edge of the stage, waiting. Garrison held him in a shot over her shoulder, an up-angle as she rose; the stage manager had gradually dimmed everything, leaving them in a bi-lobed pool of vertical straw light.

The only sound in the house was the whirring of the lift motors; I doubled it and pickled in a little plate echo.

Janacek reached across the void, broke the plane of the fourth wall, hand hovering for a moment above the red button on the arm of her chair. There was a glint of recognition in Mona's eye as the lift stopped, and her head, almost imperceptibly, shook negative.

A beat of pure ringing silence. Manny dropped in a single, solo "G." Then Janacek's hand came down. Manny hit the second "G" on contact, as the red light bloomed.

As if a trap had been jerked out, Janacek collapsed. Garrison started quick cutting: big closeup of his face, sagging, falling out of frame; fingers sliding off the button; a slowmo revolving-hover two-shot; extreme closeup on Mona's eyes, tracking right and down; floor level shot as his knees strike, impact rippling through fabric; her hand reaching out, fingers just missing as his hand falls through the frame; another matched set of one hundred eighty degree intercuts from the orbiting cams; a flashback zoom into the button press in real-time, splitscreened with a vertical shot down that pushed into the collapsed profile of Janacek's face on the floor, and finally; ultra slowmo, big closeup of his hand rebounding once and coming to rest on the deck.

Garrison held that; I cranked the gain on Manny's soundboard until the sympathetic vibrations resonating from that final "G" swelled to

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pulsing, elastic thunder. Held it for fifteen awful seconds, until there was just a hint of an *appoggiatura* breath-catch from Mona.

Then, simultaneously, blackout, cams off, and kill all audio.

I love working with pros.

Aria da Capo

Later, wiping down the keys, I sat in a horizontal throw from the worklights, smelling vomit and sawdust.

Bryant, looking around, muttered, "The wreckage of Agathon." He shook his head, leaned over the keyboard. "Manny — who played that?"

"Can't tell you," he said almost cheerfully. "I have no reliable memory. I stopped recording my inner experience after Jamie got the hook. It seemed the prudent thing to do." He paused, then added, it seemed to me slyly, "Maybe Janacek played it. Sounded like him, didn't it?"

"Who?"

"Janacek. Perhaps he was indulging in some technologically induced bicamerality."

"Janacek has been dead for ten years."

"And how long is ten years to an Aria off in the holoverse when it decides to reassert itself?"

"Oh for chrissake," sez Bryant, "Janacek was crazy. Hearing voices from out of time is crazy. This is not some romantic notion of communion; he was desperately sick person, a frightened, twisted psychotic."

"You dissemble, sir," said Manny. "I know what you heard."

They went on like that, mirroring the crap that's been pumped out by the late-nite experts, all the mundane perspectives. So it falls to me to describe what happened, what didn't, digging amid the *dubito* for a canonical interpretation.

Did Mona unwittingly become what she beheld, a homunculus of the endlessly restless consumer shunting through the Net's multiverse, only a phoneme away from flipping somewhere else? Amid declining numbers and needing a graceful exit strategy, did she stage the whole thing? Oh, oh, oh, that Evil Biz rag; a very trad spin.

Did Manny get tired of suboptimal renditions and decide to take everyone for a ride? The scary AI; another safe choice.

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Or, the paranoid wonder, could Garrison, in search of some payback, have conspired with Manny to build a digitally reinforced consensual hallucination? Nice tech-noirish feel to it.

Or was it all true?

Is mind really immanent in the holoverse? Did some fragment of Janacek's implicate pattern snap into Johnson's head like a hand grasping a long-used tool? Edgy rubber science, always a popular option.

Or could a fragment of old J. S. Bach himself have been torqued into Presence by the profanation of his work? Ah, the *Hoc est corpus* motif of a dark fantasy.

What do you want it to be?

The problem with writing this hardware solo is that I don't know where you are right now. Don't know where in the last grafs your saccadic flux slowed, your mental superposition collapsed. I want to close this sale, I want to reach terminus. Device-seconds are fine as far as they go, but I crave the completion bonus, the full bar on the satisfaction Likert that rings the bell and tops off my chip.

Anyone can see what the cameras think happened, anyone can hear what the music says. But what — *who* — was inside? That's the truly interesting question. That's what you really burn to know, isn't it?

Okay, so just tell me what you want: I'll write it. The possibilities are endless. Illusions spun to order here; rates, as always, negotiable. Looking for a storyteller? Keep surfing. I'm a jinking pennies-per-megabyte hack. I told you:

As a narrator, unreliable am I.

Dedication:

For Michael, Stuart, and Nancy, who never stopped believing. And for the Gibraltar Point '02 crew, for helping me believe again.

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A master of the short-short, Arthur Porges offers up this mini-fantasy which has a nice little sting in its tail.

Born Bad

By Arthur Porges

HE MUST HAVE BEEN BORN bad; there's little doubt about that, the flawed offspring of a particularly immoral nymph and a mysterious, anonymous minor demon straight out of hell, who promptly vanished, no more of a caring father than a male salmon.

Certainly, the baby was an unsmiling infant with depthless golden eyes that showed no emotion, except for a certain contemptuous malice, and he never cooed or prattled.

He was named Nickophemas, soon shortened to the first syllable, but that was irrelevant, since he rarely came when called, unless the quirky nymph that had birthed him insisted, usually with the aid of a heavy switch, vigorously wielded. That unpleasant phase of his life ended when, as an amazingly strong and agile child, he defied her.

At three years of age, he was caught torturing the family cat, and was surely doing worse to any small animals — mice, birds, frogs — he so deftly captured.

Later, he was turned over by his desperate mother, whom he had

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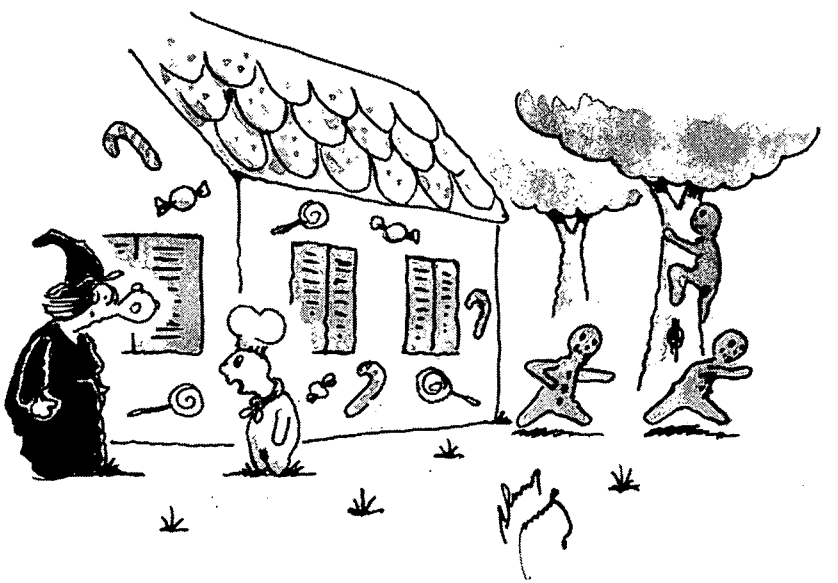
kicked almost to death with his deformed, oddly hoof-like feet, to the wise old centaur, Chiron, the sometime trainer of Hercules and other legendary heroes.

But after only eight weeks the frustrated teacher gave up and cast his obstreperous pupil out, exclaiming in disgust, "You are absolutely evil, so leave here and make your own way to a miserable, deserved end. Your lustful attack on that innocent young wood-sprite is the last straw — inexcusable!" He stared at the young outcast, who grinned maliciously, unconcerned, and snapped, "Considering what a foul brute you are now, barely ten, what will you be like, I wonder, as Old Nick!"



"Is it true what the others say about me being adopted?"

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Et in Arcadia Superego

"In broad terms, science fiction and science have always danced around each other. Science fiction is the subconscious of science. It's what scientists would do if they could...."

— Greg Bear, interview in *Locus*, February 2000.

I CHECKED my schedule and winced. My next patient was Mr. Science. An exceedingly tough case. Almost made me want to retire my couch. I had never faced such an intractable subject before. Although Mr. Science was plainly suffering from a myriad of repressed neuroses and their repercussions in his life, he just couldn't seem to untangle that portion of his personality that was responsible for his troubles. I had been delving into Mr. Science's subconscious for over three years now, and still hadn't made a scintilla of progress. By all textbook standards, Mr. Science and I should have been able to achieve by now at least some forward movement toward integrating his dark side, toward defusing those submerged aspects of his personality that interfered with his life. But instead, it was as if all the attention paid to his quirky subconscious only strengthened it.

I dreaded hearing what new troubles Mr. Science's neurotic behavior had caused him since our last visit. That was the way we always began our sessions, with a recounting of the pitfalls Mr. Science had dug for himself.

Unable to delay the inevitable any longer, I buzzed Mr. S. into my office.

Mr. Science was an unprepossessing sort. Neither diminutive nor strapping, neither ugly nor handsome, neither self-effacing nor charismatic, neither introverted nor extroverted, he was just average, the type of fellow you could pass on the street and simply not register one way or another. He wore, as

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usual, his white, stained labcoat, having come for our twice-weekly lunch-hour session straight from the nearby university where he did his research.

We shook hands and exchanged some perfunctory greetings. Then Mr. Science stretched himself out upon the couch and launched into his newest litany of woes in a troubled voice.

"I was composing a grant request for a new project yesterday. When I came to the section regarding staffing, I found myself requesting 'six mentats.' I have no actual idea as to what a 'mentat' might be, or what they might do. But it suddenly seemed imperative that I have six of them for my project to succeed."

This was utterly typical of Mr. Science's missteps and mental self-betrayals. From some deep well of the subconscious, he would dredge up the most bizarre concepts, terms and actions. I had almost given up all hope of discovering the source of these ideations, and was now reduced to grasping at conceptual straws.

"Mr. Science, perhaps you're suffering from glossolalia. You know, speaking in tongues. Or it could be Tourette's. This strange jargon you're always spouting — it could be just a neurological glitch."

Mr. Science looked thoughtful. "No, no, it's much more than that. When I wrote down 'six mentats' I had a definite conception about their abilities and character. I can't verbalize it now, but at the time it was a solid impression."

I sought to move on. "Well, if that was the worst thing that happened since our last session — "

"Oh, but it's not." A blush spread across Mr. Science's face. "Last night, I refused to have sex with my wife. We've been trying to have a child, you see, and accordingly neither one of us was using any birth-control method. But it suddenly seemed to me that my wife was a member of a humanoid alien species, and that if she got pregnant, it would mean her death, as the carnivorous baby consumed her body for its first postparturition meal."

I said nothing for a good ten seconds. Frankly, I was stupefied. I had personally heard many sexual psychoses in my career, and knew of many more through reading, but this delusion was beyond all my experience.

"What — what did your wife say to this fear of yours?"

"Oh, I couldn't tell her in so many words. So I shifted the blame

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to myself by claiming that I simply wasn't in kemmer yet."

"Kemmer? What is that term?"

Mr. Science looked baffled and worried. "Did I say something odd? What was it? I'm afraid I can't now recall — "

My patience reached a sudden end, and I spoke sternly. "Mr. Science, together we have been exploring your psyche for some three years now, and I don't feel we're any closer to explicating your dysfunctional behavior than we were at the start. In fact, all my dedicated months of therapy seem to have done is to make your troubles worse. It's as if having an audience has encouraged you to act out. More and more you are capitulating to your delusions. I get the sense that you actually enjoy these counterfactual forays into the world of your unfettered imagination. In fact, I'm beginning to wonder if, despite a lack of clinical signs, you are not suffering from a multiple personality disorder. I suspect that I'm reaching a buried part of you that *delights* in the unconventional and far-out."

Mr. Science began to weep softly. "It's true, I admit it. The life of a scientist is so boring, so methodical, so frustrating. There's nothing exciting or vibrant or colorful about it. I love the subject matter of my field, but the damn scientific method and the small incremental steps it involves are stifling my soul! Not to mention the bureaucracy, the rivalries, the teaching, the dry, tedious language of the journals. I want the allure of science without the drudgery and heartless logic. I want to revel in vast vistas of time and space, to have exotic sex with oviparous Martian princesses, to travel faster than light and read minds, to have robotic best friends and converse with intelligent dogs. But I don't know how to get any of that!"

I let Mr. Science sob himself dry before I answered. "Well, now we're finally making some progress. This is most heartening. By acknowledging these impossible desires, we've finally taken a step toward banishing them. I'm afraid our fifty minutes are up now, however, Mr. Science. But I'm confident we'll take even bigger strides toward your cure the next time we meet."

After seeing the sniffling Mr. Science out the door, I returned to my desk. I opened a lower drawer, activated the ansible communicator linking me to the Sevagram in Fomalhaut, and reported that I was almost ready to close another case.

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One of the prime forces in the cyberpunk movement, Bruce Sterling keeps busy these days with things like a monthly column in Wired *magazine, novels such as* The Zenith Angle, *and a blog at* http://blog.wired.com/sterling/. *His new contribution to our magazine—his first since "In Paradise" (September, 2002)—is a fantasy story unlike most. It's hard to describe, but perhaps "Crusaderpunk" does the story some justice. Whatever you call it, it's definitely a wild ride...*

The Blemmye's Stratagem

By Bruce Sterling

A MESSENGER FLEW ABOVE the alleys of Tyre, skirting the torn green heads of the tallest palm trees. With a flutter of wings, it settled high on a stony ledge. The pigeon was quickly seized by a maiden within the tower. She gratefully kissed the bird's sleek gray head.

Sir Roger of Edessa, the maiden's lover, roamed the Holy Land on his knight errantry. Thanks to the maiden herself, Sir Roger possessed one precious cage of homing pigeons. Roger's words winged it to her, straight to her tender hands, soaring over every obstacle in a Holy Land aflame. The birds flapped over drum-pounding, horn-blaring Seljuk marauders, and evil mamelukes with faces masked in chainmail. They flitted over Ismaili fedayeen bent on murder and utterly careless of life.

An entire, busy network of messenger pigeons moved over the unknowing populace. These birds carried news through Jerusalem, Damascus, Cairo, and Beirut. They flitted over cavaliers from every cranny of Christendom, armed pilgrims who were starving, sweating, flea-bitten and consumed with poxes. Birds laden with script flew over sunburned,

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axe-wielding Vikings. Over fanatical Templars and cruel, black-clad Teutonic Knights, baking like armored lobsters in the blazing sun. Over a scum of Greek peltasts and a scrim of Italian condottiere.

With trembling, ink-stained fingers, the maiden untied the tidy scroll from the bird's pink leg. There was a pounding ache within her bosom. Would it be another poem? She often swooned on reading Roger's poems.

No. This bird had not come from Roger of Edessa. She had been cruelly misled by her own false hopes. The messenger bird was just another tiresome commercial bird. It carried nothing but a sordid rush of text.

"Salt. Ivory. Tortoiseshell. Saffron. Rice. Frankincense. Iron. Copper. Tin. Lead. Coral. Topaz. Storax. Glass. Realgar. Antimony. Gold. Silver. Honey. Spikenard. Costus. Agate. Carnelian. Lycium. Cotton. Silk. Mallow. Pepper. Malabathrum. Pearls. Diamonds. Rubies. Sapphires."

Every good in this extensive list was followed by its price.

The girl locked the pigeon into its labeled wooden cage, along with dozens of other birds, her fellow captives within the gloomy tower. Using cuttlefish ink and a razor-trimmed feather, the girl copied the message into an enormous dusty ledger. If she ever failed in her duty to record, oh the woe she would receive at the hands of the Mother Superior. Bread and water. Endless kneeling, many rosaries.

The pigeon clerk rubbed at her watery eyes, harshly afflicted by fine print and bad lighting. She returned to lean her silken elbows on the cool, freckled stone, to contemplate the sparkling Mediterranean and a black swarm of profiteering Italian galleys. Perhaps Sir Roger of Edessa was dead. Poor Roger had been slain by a cruel Moslem champion, or else he was dead of some plague. Roger would never write a poem to her again. At the age of seventeen, she was abandoned to her desolate fate.

How likely all this seemed. Her doom was so total and utter. If Roger failed to rescue her from this miserable life tending pigeons, she would be forced to take unwelcome vows.... She would have to join the Little Sisters of the Hospitallers below the tower of birds, in that ever-swelling crowd of the Holy Land's black widows, another loveless wretch of a girl amid that pitiful host of husbandless crones and fatherless orphans, all of them bottled up behind tall, rocky walls, hopelessly trapped without any lands or dowries.... The pale brides of Christ, moody and distracted,

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waiting in itchy torment for some fatal pagan horde of dark-eyed Moslem fiends to conquer Tyre and ravage their fortress of chastity....

Another bird appeared in flight. The maiden's heart rose to beat in her throat. This was a strong bird, a swift one. When he arrived, his legs were clasped by two delicate bands of gold. His feathers smelled of incense.

The writing, though very tiny, was the most beautiful the girl had ever seen. The ink was blood-red, and it glittered.

DEAREST HUDEGAR
With the tip of my brush I give you the honey of good news
Our Silent Master has summoned us both
So prepare yourself quickly
For I hasten to you with a caravan of many strong men to take you to his Paradise
(signed) THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

The maiden began to weep, for her name was not Hudegar. She had never heard of any woman named Hudegar.

Whether Christian or Moslem, hamlets in the Holy Land were always much the same: a huddle of dusty cottages around a well, a mill, and an oven. The Abbess Hildegart rode demurely into the plundered village, escorted by the heavily armed caravan of the Grand Assassin.

This hapless little village had been crushed with particular gusto. Vengeful marauders had hacked down the olive groves, set fire to the vineyard, and poisoned the well. Since they were still close to Tyre, the strongest city yet held by the reeling Crusader forces, Hildegart rather suspected the work of Hospitallers.

This conclusion disturbed her. Hildegart herself had founded the Hospitaller Order. She had created and financed a hospital corps in order to heal the sick, to run a chain of inns, and to give peace, comfort, and money-changing services to the endless sun-dazed hordes of holy European pilgrims.

Hildegart's idea had been a clever one, and was much appreciated by her patron, the Silent Master. However, some seventy years had passed since this invention of hers, and Hildegart had been forced to see her brilliant scheme degenerating. Somehow the Hospitaller corps, this kindly

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order of medical monks, had transformed itself into the most violent, fanatical soldiery in the Crusader forces. It seemed that their skills in healing injured flesh and bone also gave them a special advantage in chopping men apart. Even the Templars were scared of the Hospitallers, and the Templars frightened Assassins so badly that the Assassins often paid them for protection.

Some of the barns in the smashed village were still defensible. Sinan, the Old Man of the Mountain and the Ayatollah of Assassins, ordered his caravan to put up for the night. The caravan men made camp, buried several abandoned corpses, set up sentries, and struggled to water the horses with the tainted murk from the well.

The Abbess and the Assassin settled down behind their armed sentries, to eat and chat. Hildegart and Sinan had known each other for much longer than most people would ever live. Despite the fact that they both labored loyally for the Silent Master, their personal relations were rather strained. There had been times in her long, long life when Hildegart had felt rather safe and happy with Sinan. Sinan was an ageless Moslem wizard and therefore evil incarnate, but Sinan had once sheltered her from men even more dangerous than himself.

Those pleasant years of their history, unfortunately, were long behind both of them. At the age of one hundred seventeen, Sinan could not possibly protect Hildegart from any man more dangerous than himself, for Sinan the Assassin had become the most dangerous man in the world. The number of Crusaders who had fallen to his depredations was beyond all reckoning, though Hildegart shrewdly estimated it at somewhere over four thousand.

Underlit by red flames from his dainty iron camp stove, Sinan ate his roasted kabobs and said little. He offered her a warm, dark, gazelle-eyed look. Hildegart stirred uneasily in her dark riding cloak, hood, and wimple. Although Sinan was very intelligent and had learned a great deal about inflicting terror, Sinan's heart never changed much with the passing decades. He was always the same. Sinan was simple, direct, and devout in his habits, and he prayed five times every day, which (by Hildegart's reckoning) would likely make some two hundred thousand acts of prayer, every one of them involving a fervent hope that Crusaders would perish and burn in Hell.

Hildegart warmed one chilly hand at the iron brazier. Nearby, the

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homing pigeons cooed in their portable cribs. The poor pigeons were cold and unhappy, even more anxious to return to Tyre than she was. Perhaps they sensed that Sinan's mercenaries longed to pluck and eat them. "Sinan, where did you find this horrible band of cutthroats?"

"I bought them for us, my dear," Sinan told her politely. "These men are Khwarizmian Turks from the mountains far beyond Samarkand. They are quite lost here in Palestine, without any land or loyalties. Therefore they are of use to me, and to our Silent Master, and to his purposes."

"Do you trust these bandy-legged fiends?"

"No, I don't trust them at all. But they speak only an obscure dialect, and unlike you and me, they are not People of the Book. So they cannot ever reveal what they may see of our Silent Master. Besides, the Khwarizmian Turks were cheap to purchase. They flee a great terror, you see. They flee the Great Khan of the Mongols."

Hildegart considered these gnomic remarks. Sinan wasn't lying. Sinan never lied to her; he was just grotesquely persistent in his pagan delusions. "Sinan, do I need to know more about terrible Great Khan?"

"Better not to contemplate such things, my pearl of wisdom. Let's play a game of chess."

"Not this time, no."

"Why be coy? I'll spot you an elephant rook!"

"My markets for Chinese silk have been very disturbed these past ten years. Is this so-called Great Khan the source of my commercial difficulty?"

Sinan munched thoughtfully at his skewer of peppered mutton. Her remarks had irritated him. Brave men killed and died at Sinan's word, and yet she, Hildegart, was far richer than he was. Hildegart was the richest woman in the world. As the founder, accountant, banker, and chief moneylender of the Hospitaller order, Hildegart found her greatest joy in life managing international markets. She placed her money into goods and cities where it would create more money, and then she counted that money with great and precise care, and she placed it again. Hildegart had been doing this for decades, persistently and secretly, through a network of nameless agents in cities from Spain to India, a network linked by swift birds and entirely unsuspected by mankind.

Sinan knew how all this counting and placing of money was done, but as an Ayatollah of Assassins, he considered it boring and ignoble labor.

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That was why he was always sending her messenger birds and begging her for loans of cash.

"Dear, kind, sweet Hudegar," the Assassin said coaxingly.

Hildegart blushed. "No one calls me Hudegar. Except for you, they all died ages ago."

"Dear Hudegar, how could I ever forget my sweet pet name for you?"

"That was a slave girl's name."

"We're all the slaves of God, my precious! Even our Silent Master." Sinan yanked the metal skewer from his strong white teeth. "Are you too proud to obey his summons now, blessed Mother Superior? Are you tired of your long life, now that your Christian Franks are finally chased back into the sea by the warriors of righteousness?"

"I'm here with you, aren't I?" said Hildegart, avoiding his eyes. "I could be tending the wounded and doing my accounts. Why did you write to me in French? The whole convent's chattering about your mysterious bird and its message. You know how women talk when they've been cloistered."

"You never answer me when I write to you in Arabic," Sinan complained. He mopped at his fine black beard with a square of pink Chinese silk. "I write to you constantly! You know the cost of shipping these homing pigeons! Their flesh is more precious than amber!" The Assassin waved away the thickening smoke from the coals of his cookstove.

Hildegart lit the sesame oil at the spout of a small brass lamp. "I do write to you, dear Sinan, with important financial news, but in return, you write to me of nothing but your evil boasting and your military mayhem."

"I'm composing our history there!" Sinan protested. "I am putting my heart's blood into those verses, woman! You of all women should appreciate that effort!"

"Oh, very well then." Hildegart switched to Arabic, a language she knew fluently, thanks to her years as a captive concubine.

"'With the prodigies of my pen I express the marvel of the fall of Jerusalem,'" she quoted at him. "'I fill the towers of the Zodiac with stars, and the caskets with my pearls of insight. I spread the joyful news far and wide, bringing perfume to Persia and conversation to Samarkand. The sweetness of holy victory surpasses candied fruits and cane sugar.'"

"How clever you are, Hudegar! Those were my finest verses, too."

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Sinan's dark, arching brows knotted hopefully. "That's some pretty grand stuff there, isn't it?"

"You shouldn't try to be a poet, Sinan. Let's face it, you are an alchemist."

"But I've learned everything there is to know about chemistry and machinery," Sinan protested. "Those fields of learning are ignoble and boring. Poetry and literature, by contrast, are fields of inexhaustible knowledge! Yes, I admit it, I do lack native talent for poesy — for when I began writing, my history was just a dry recital of factual events! But I have finally found my true voice as a poet, for I have mastered the challenge of narrating great deeds on the battlefield!"

Hildegart's temper rose. "Am I supposed to praise you for that? I had *investments* in Jerusalem, you silly block of wood! My best sugar presses were there — my favorite cotton dyes...and you can bet I'll tell the Blemmye all about those severe commercial losses!"

"You may quote me even further, and recite to him how Christian Jerusalem fell to the Moslems in flames and screams," said Sinan tautly. "Tell him that every tribe of Frank will be chased back into the ocean! Eighty-nine long years since these unbathed wretches staggered in from Turkey to steal our lands, looking like so many disinterred corpses! But at last, broken with righteous fire and sword, the occupiers flee the armies of Jihad like whipped dogs. Never to return! I have lived through all of that humiliation, Hudegar. I was forced to witness every sorrowful day of my people's long affliction. At last, in this glorious day of supreme justice, I will see the backs of those alien invaders. Do you know what I just heard Saladin say?"

Hildegart ate another salted olive. She had been born in Germany and had never gotten over how delicious olives were. "All right. What did he say?"

"Saladin will *build ships and sail after the retreating Christians to Europe.*" Sinan drew an amazed breath. "Can you imagine the stern qualities of that great soldier, who would trust to the perils of the open ocean to avenge our insulted faith? That's the greatest tribute to knightly bravery that I can imagine!"

"Why do you even bother with lowborn scum like Saladin? Saladin is a Kurd and a Shi'ite."

"Oh, no. Saladin is the chosen of God. He used the wealth of Egypt to

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conquer Syria. He used the wealth of Syria to conquer Mesopotamia. The wealth of Mesopotamia will finally liberate Palestine. Saladin will die with exhausted armies and an empty treasury. Saladin is very thin, and he suffers from bellyaches, but thanks to him, Palestine will be ours again. Those outlaw Crusader states of Christian Outremer will cease to be. That is the divine truth of history and yes, I will bear witness to divine truth. I must bear witness, you know. Such things are required of a scholar."

Hildegart sighed, at a loss for words. Hildegart knew so many words, reams and reams of words. She knew low German, French, Arabic, much Turkish, some Greek. Proper history was written in Latin, of course. Having successfully memorized the Old and New Testaments at the age of fourteen, Hildegart could manage rather well in Latin, but she had given up her own attempts to write any kind of history during the reign of Baldwin the Leper.

The Crusader King of Jerusalem had a loathsome Middle Eastern disease, and Hildegart found herself chronicling Baldwin's incessant defeats in a stale, stilted language that smelled of death. "King Baldwin the Leper suffered this crushing setback, King Baldwin the Leper failed at that diplomatic initiative...." The Leper seemed to mean well, and yet he was so stupid.... One stormy morning Hildegart had pulled years of secret records from her hidden cabinets and burned every one of them. It felt so good to destroy such weary knowledge that she had sung and danced.

Sinan gazed on her hopefully. "Can't you say just a bit more about my glamorous poetic efforts, Hudegar?"

"You are improving," she allowed. "I rather liked that line about the candied fruits. Those jongleurs of Eleanor of Aquitaine, they never write verse half so luscious as you do."

Sinan beamed on her for a moment, and returned to gnawing his mutton. However, he was quick to sense a left-handed compliment. "That Frankish queen, she prefers the love poems made by vagrants for women. All Frankish ladies enjoy such poems. I myself can write very sweetly about women and love. But I would never show those poems of mine to anyone, because they are too deeply felt."

"No doubt."

Sinan narrowed his eyes. "I can remember every woman who ever

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passed through my hands. By name and by face!"

"All of them? Could that be possible?"

"Oh come now, I never married more than four at a time! I can remember all of my wives very vividly. I shall prove it to you now, my doubting one! My very first wife was the widow of my older brother; she was Fatima, the eldest, with the two sons, my nephews. Fatima was dutiful and good. Then there was the Persian girl that the Sultan gave me: she was Bishar. She had crossed eyes, but such pretty legs. When my fortunes prospered, I bought the Greek girl Phoebe to cook for my other two."

Hildegart shifted uneasily.

"Then there was you, Hudegar the Frankish girl, my gift from the Silent Master. What splendid flesh you had. Hair like wheat and cheeks like apples. How you thrived in my courtyard and my library. You wanted kisses more than the other three combined. We had three daughters and the small son who died nameless." Sinan sighed from the depth of his heart. "Those are all such songs of loss and sorrow, my sweet songs of all my dear wives."

HILDEGART'S EARLY YEARS had been tangled and difficult. She had left Germany as a teenaged nun in the massive train of Peter the Hermit, a tumbling migration of thousands of the wildly inspired, in the People's Crusade. They walked down the Rhine, they trudged down the Danube, they stumbled starving across Hungary, Byzantium, and the Balkans, asking at every town and village if the place might perhaps be Jerusalem.

The People' s Crusade killed most of its participants, but a crusade was the only sure way that Hildegart, who was the humble daughter of a falconer, could guarantee the remission of her sins. Hildegart marched from April to October of 1096. She was raped, starved, survived typhus, and arrived pregnant on an obscure hilltop in Turkey. There every man in her dwindling band was riddled with Seljuk arrows by the troops of Kilij Arslan.

Hildegart was purchased by a Turkish speculator, who took her infant for his own purposes, and then sold her to the aging Sultan of Mosul. The Sultan visited her once for form's sake, then left her to her own devices

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within his harem. The Mosul harem was a quiet, solemn place, very much like the convent she had left in Germany, except for the silks, the dancing, and the eunuchs. There Hildegart learned to speak Turkish and Arabic, to play a lute, to embroider, and to successfully manage the considerable administrative overhead involved in running the palace baths.

After the Sultan's murder, she was manumitted and conveyed to a Jewish merchant, by whom she had a son.

The Jew taught her accounting, using a new system of numeration he had learned from colleagues in India. He and the son then vanished on an overly daring business expedition into Christian-held Antioch. Hildegart was sold to meet his business debts. Given her skills and accomplishments, though, she was quickly purchased by a foreign diplomat.

This diplomat traveled extensively through Islam, together with his train of servants, in a slow pilgrimage from court to court. It was a rewarding life, in its way. Moslem courts competed in their lavish hospitality for distinguished foreigners. Foreign merchants and envoys, who lacked local clan ties, often made the most honest and efficient court officials. The Blemmye profited by this.

Literate scholars of the Islamic courts had of course heard tell of the exotic Blemmyae people. The Blemmyae were men from the land of Prester John, the men whose heads grew beneath their shoulders.

The Blemmye had no head; he was acephalous. Across his broad, barren shoulders grew a series of horny plates. Where a man might have paps, the Blemmye had two round black eyes, and he had a large, snorting nose in his chest. Where a navel might have been was his mouth. The Blemmye's mouth was a round, lipless, speechless hole, white and pink and ridged inside, and cinching tight like a bag. The Blemmye's feet, always neatly kept in soft leather Turkish boots, were quite toeless. He had beautiful hands, however, and his dangling, muscular arms were as round and solid as the trunks of trees.

The Blemmye, although he could not speak aloud, was widely known for his courteous behavior, his peaceable demeanor, and his generous gifts. In the troubled and turbulent Damascene court, the Blemmye was accepted without much demur.

The Blemmye was generally unhappy with the quality of his servants. They lacked the keen intelligence to meet his exacting requirements.

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Hildegart was a rare find for him, and she rose rapidly in her Silent Master's estimation.

The Blemmye wrote an excellent Arabic, but he wrote it in the same way he read books: entire pages at once, in one single comprehensive glance. So rather than beginning at the top of a page and writing from right to left, as any Arab scholar would, the Blemmye dashed and dotted his black markings across the paper, seemingly at random. Then he would wait, with unblinking eyes, to see if enough ink had arrived for his reader's comprehension.

If not, then he would dabble in more ink, but the trial annoyed him.

Hildegart had a particular gift for piecing out the Blemmye's fragmentary dabblings. For Hildegart, Arabic was also a foreign language, but she memorized long texts with ease, and she was exceedingly clever with numbers. Despite her master's tonguelessness, she also understood his moods, mostly through his snorts and his nervous, hand-wringing gestures. The Blemmye became reliant on her services, and he rewarded her well.

When his business called him far from Damascus, the Blemmye conveyed Hildegart to the care of his chief agent within the Syrian court, an Iraqi alchemist and engineer. Rashid al-din Sinan made his living from "Naphth," a flaming war-product that oozed blackly from the reedy marshes of his native Tigris.

Like most alchemists, Sinan had extensive interests in hermetic theology, as well as civil engineering, calligraphy, rhetoric, diplomacy, and the herbarium. As a canny and gifted courtier, living on his wits, Sinan was quick to serve any diplomat who could pay for his provisions with small but perfect diamonds, as the Blemmye did. Sinan gracefully accepted Hildegart as his new concubine, and taught her the abacus and the tally-stick.

The Blemmye, being a diplomat, was deeply involved in international trade. He tirelessly sought out various rare oils, mineral salts, glasses, saltpeter, sulfur, potash, alchemical acids, and limes. He would trade in other goods to obtain the substances he prized, but his means were always subordinated to those same ends.

The Blemmye's personal needs were rather modest. However, he lavished many gifts on his mistress. The Blemmye was pitifully jealous of this female Blemmye. He kept her in such deep, secluded purdah that she

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was never glimpsed by anyone.

Hildegart and Sinan became the Blemmye's most trusted servants. He gave them his alchemical philters to drink, so that their flesh would not age in the mortal way of men and women. Many years of energetic action transpired, led by the pressing needs of their Silent Master. As wizard and mother abbess, Sinan and Hildegart grew in age and cunning, wealth and scholarship. Trade routes and caravans conveyed the Blemmye's goods and agents from the far reaches of Moslem Spain as far as the Spice Islands.

When Crusader ships appeared in the Holy Land, and linked the Moslem world with the distant commercial cities of the Atlantic and the Baltic, the Blemmye was greatly pleased.

Eventually, Sinan and Hildegart were forced to part, for their uncanny agelessness had aroused suspicion in Damascus. Sinan removed himself to a cult headquarters in Alamut, where he pursued the mystic doctrines and tactics of the Ismaili Assassins. Hildegart migrated to the Crusader cities of Outremer, where she married a wise and all-accepting Maronite. She had three more children by this union.

Time ended that marriage as it had all her other such relations. Eventually, Hildegart found that she had tired of men and children, of their roughness and their importunities. She resumed the veil as the female Abbess of a convent stronghold in Tyre. She became the wealthy commander of a crowd of cloistered nuns, busy women with highly lucrative skills at weaving, adorning, and marketing Eastern fabrics.

The Abbess Hildegart was the busiest person that she knew. Even in times of war, she received many informations from the farthest rims of the world, and she knew the price and location of the rarest of earthly goods. Yet there was a hollowness in her life, a roiling feeling that dark events were unfolding, events beyond any mastery.

Assuming that all her children had somehow lived — and that her children had children, and that they had lived as well — and that those grandchildren, remorseless as the calendar, had further peopled the Earth — Hildegart's abacus showed her as a silent Mother Superior to a growing horde of over three hundred people. They were Christians, Jews, Moslems, a vast and ever-ramifying human family, united in nothing but their ignorance of her own endlessly spreading life.

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The Dead Sea was as unpleasant as its name. Cursed Sodom was to the south, suicidal Masada to the middle, and a bloodstained River Jordan to the north. The lake gave pitch and bitumen, and mounds of gray, tainted salt. Birds that bathed in its water died and were crusted with minerals.

Arid limestone hills and caves on the Dead Sea shores had gone undisturbed for centuries.

Within this barren wilderness, the Blemmye had settled himself. Of late, the Silent Master, once so restless in his worldly quests for goods and services, moved little from his secretive Paradise, dug within the Dead Sea's barren hills. Sometimes, especially helpful merchants from Hildegart's pigeon network would be taken there, or Assassins would be briefed there on one last self-sacrificing mission. It was in the Blemmye's Paradise that Sinan and Hildegart drank the delicious elixirs that lengthened their lives. There were gardens there, and stores of rare minerals. The Blemmye's hidden palace also held an arsenal. It concealed the many sinister weapons that Sinan had built.

No skill in military engineering was concealed from the cunning master of Assassins. Sinan knew well the mechanical secrets of the jarkh, the zanbarak, the qaws al-ziyar, and even the fearsome manjaniq, a death-machine men called "The Long-Haired Bride." With the Blemmye's aid and counsel, Sinan had built sinister crossbows with thick twisted skeins of silk and horsehair, capable of firing great iron beams, granite stones, red-hot bricks, and sealed clay bombs that splattered alchemical flames. Spewing, shrieking rockets from China were not beyond Sinan's war skills, nor was the Byzantine boiler that spewed ever-burning Greek Fire. Though difficult to move and conceal, these massive weapons of destruction were frighteningly potent. In cunning hands, they had shaped the fates of many a quarrelsome emirate. They had even hastened the fall of Jerusalem.

In his restless travels, the Blemmye had collected many rare herbs for the exquisite pergolas of his Paradise. He carefully collected the powder from within their flowers, and strained and boiled their saps for his marvelous elixirs. The Blemmye had forges and workshops full of curious instruments of metal and glass. He had struggled for years to breed superior camels for his far-ranging caravans. He had created a unique race of peculiar beasts, with hairless, scaly hides and spotted necks like cameleopards.

The choicest feature of the Blemmye's Paradise was its enormous

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bath. Sinan led his caravan men in a loud prayer of thanksgiving for their safe arrival. He commended their souls to his God, then he ushered the dusty, thirsting warriors within the marbled precincts.

Pure water gushed there from many great brass nozzles. The men eagerly doffed their chain-mail armor and their filthy gear. They laughed and sang, splashing their tattooed limbs in the sweet, cleansing waters. Delicate fumes of incense made their spirits soar to the heavens.

Very gently, their spirits left their bodies.

The freshly washed dead were carried away on handcarts by the Blemmye's house servants. These servants were eunuchs, and rendered tongueless.

Through her long and frugal habit, Hildegart carefully sorted through the effects of the dead men. The Moslem and Christian women who haunted the battlefields of the Holy Land, comforting the wounded and burying the slain, generally derived more wealth from dead men than they ever did from their live protectors. Female camp followers of various faiths often encountered one another in the newly strewn fields of male corpses. They would bargain by gesture and swap the dead men's clothes, trinkets, holy medals, knives, and bludgeons.

Sinan sought her out as Hildegart neatly arranged the dead men's dusty riding boots. He was unhappy. "The Silent One has written his commands for us," he told her. He frowned over his freshly inked instructions. "The eunuchs are to throw the bodies of the men into the mine shaft, as usual. But then we are to put the caravan's horses into the bath as well. All of them!" The Assassin gazed at her moodily. "There would seem to be scarcely anyone here. I see none of his gardeners, I see no secretaries.... The Master is badly understaffed. Scutwork of this kind is unworthy of the two of us. I don't understand this."

Hildegart was shocked. "It was well worth doing to rid ourselves of those evil foreign Turks, but we can't possibly stable horses in that beautiful marble bath."

"Stable them? My dear, we are to kill the horses and throw them down into the mine. That's what the Master has written for us here. See if there's not some mistake, eh? You were always so good at interpreting."

Hildegart closely examined the spattered parchment. The Blemmye's queer handwriting was unmistakable, and his Arabic had improved with

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the years. "These orders are just as you say, but they make no sense. Without pack-horses, how am I to return to Tyre, and you to Alamut?"

Sinan looked at her in fear. "What are you telling me? Do you dare to question the Silent Master's orders?"

"No, you're the man," she told him quickly. "You should question his orders."

HILDEGART HAD NOT had an audience with the Blemmye in some eight years. Their only communication was through couriers, or much more commonly, through the messenger birds.

In earlier days, when his writings had been harder to interpret, Hildegart had almost been a body servant to the Blemmye. She had fetched his ink, brought him his grapes, bread, and honey, and even seen him off to his strange, shrouded bed. Then she had left him to dwell in his Paradise, and she had lived for many years many leagues away from him. As long as they were still writing to each other, however, he never complained about missing her.

The Blemmye gave her his old, knowing look. His eyes, round, black, and wise, spread in his chest a hand's span apart. The Blemmye wore baggy trousers of flowered blue silk, beautiful leather boots, and of course no headgear. He sat cross-legged on a velvet cushion on the floor of his office, with his Indian inks, his wax seals, his accounting books, and his elaborate plans and parchments. The Blemmye's enormous arms had gone thinner with the years, and his speckled hide looked pale. His hands, once so deft and tireless, seemed to tremble uncontrollably.

"The Master must be ill," hissed Hildegart to Sinan. The two of them whispered together, for they were almost certain that the Blemmye could not hear or understand a whispered voice. The Blemmye did have ears, or fleshy excrescences anyway, but their Silent Master never responded to speech, even in the languages that he could read and write.

"I will formally declaim the splendid rhetoric that befits our lordly Master, while you will write to him at my dictation," Sinan ordered.

Hildegart obediently seated herself on a small tasseled carpet.

Sinan bowed low, placing his hand on his heart. He touched his

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fingertips to lips and forehead. "A most respectful greetings, dread Lord! May Allah keep you in your customary wisdom, health and strength! The hearts of your servants overflow with joy over too long an absence from your august presence!"

"How are you doing, dear old Blemmye?" Hildegart wrote briskly. She shoved the parchment forward.

The Blemmye plucked up the parchment and eyed it. Then he bent over, and his wrist slung ink in a fury.

"My heart has been shattered / the eternal darkness between the worlds closes in / my nights burn unbroken by sleep I bleed slowly / from within / I have no strength to greet the dawn / for my endless days are spent in sighing grief and vain regrets / the Light of All My Life has perished / I will never hear from her again / never never never again / will I read her sweet words of knowledge understanding and consolation / henceforth I walk in darkness / for my days of alien exile wind to their fatal climax."

Hildegart held up the message and a smear of ink ran down it like a black tear.

The two of them had never had the least idea that the Blemmye's wife had come to harm. The Blemmye guarded her so jealously that such a thing scarcely seemed possible.

But the mistress of their Silent Master, though very female, was not a Blemmye at all. She was not even a woman.

The Blemmye led them to the harem where he had hidden her.

This excavation had been the Blemmye's first great project. He had bought many slaves to bore and dig deep shafts into the soft Dead Sea limestone. The slaves often died in despair from the senseless work, perishing from the heat, the lack of fresh water, and the heavy, miasmic salt air.

But then, at Hildegart's counseling, the hapless slaves were freed and dismissed. Instead of using harsh whips and chains, the Blemmye simply tossed a few small diamonds into the rubble at the bottom of the pit.

Word soon spread of a secret diamond mine. Strong men from far and wide arrived secretly in many eager gangs. Without orders, pay, or any words of persuasion, they imported their own tools into the wasteland.

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Then the miners fought recklessly and even stabbed each other for the privilege of expanding the Blemmye's diggings. Miraculous tons of limestone were quarried, enough rock to provide firm foundations for every structure in the Blemmye's Paradise. The miners wept with delight at the discovery of every precious stone.

When no more diamonds appeared, the miners soon wearied of their sport. The secret mine was abandoned and swiftly forgotten.

Within this cavernous dugout, then, was where the Blemmye had hidden his darling.

The Silent Master removed a counterweighted sheet of glass and iron. From the black gulf, an eye-watering, hellish stink of lime and sulfur wafted forth.

Strapping two panes of glass to his enormous face, the Blemmye inhaled sharply through his great trumpet of a nose. Then he rushed headlong into the stinking gloom.

Hildegart urged Sinan to retreat from the gush of foul miasma, but the Assassin resisted her urgings. "I always wondered what our Master did with all that brimstone. This is astonishing."

"The Blemmye loves a creature from Hell," said Hildegart, crossing herself.

"Well, if this is Hell, then we ourselves built it, my dear." Sinan shrouded his eyes and peered within the acid murk. "I see so many bones in there. I must go in there, you know, I must bear witness and write of all this.... Why don't you come along with me?"

"Are you joking? A mine is no place for a woman!"

"Of course it is, my dear! You simply must come down into Hell with me. You're the only aide memoire available, and besides, you know that I rely on your judgment."

When Hildegart stiffly refused him, Sinan shrugged at her womanly fears and rushed forward into the gassy murk. Hildegart wept for him, and began to pray — praying for her own sake, because Sinan's salvation was entirely beyond retrieval.

At the fifth bead of her rosary, the brave Assassin reappeared, half-leading his stricken Master. They were tugging and heaving together at a great, white, armored plate, a bone-colored thing like a gigantic shard of pottery.

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This broken armor, with a few tangled limbs and bits of dry gut, that was all that was left of the Blemmye's Lady. She had been something like a great, boiled, stinking crab. Something like a barb-tailed desert scorpion, living under a rock.

In her silent life, cloistered deep within the smoking, stony earth, the Blemmye's Lady had fed well, and grown into a size so vast and bony and monstrous that she could no longer fit through the narrow cave mouth. Sinan and the Blemmye were barely able to tug her skeletal remnants into daylight.

The Blemmye pawed at a hidden trigger, and the great iron door swung shut behind him with a hollow boom. He wheezed and coughed, and snorted loudly through his dripping nose.

Sinan, who had breathed less deeply of the hellish fumes, was the first to recover. He spat, and wiped his streaming eyes, then gestured to Hildegart for pen and ink.

Then Sinan sat atop a limestone boulder. He ignored her questions with a shake of his turbaned head, and fervently scribbled his notes.

Hildegart followed the laboring Blemmye as he tugged at his bony, rattling burden. The Silent Master trembled like a dying ox as he hauled the big skidding carcass. His sturdy leather boots had been lacerated, as if chopped by picks and hatchets.

Ignoring his wounds, the Blemmye dragged the riddled corpse of his beloved, yard by painful yard, down the slope toward the Dead Sea. The empty carapace was full of broken holes. The she-demon had been pecked to pieces from within.

Hildegart had never seen the Blemmye hurt. But she had seen enough wounded men to know the look of mortal despair, even on a face as strange as his.

The Blemmye collapsed in anguish at the rim of the sullen salt lake.

Hildegart smoothed the empty sand before him with her sandaled foot. Then she wrote to him with a long brass pin from the clasp of her cloak. "Master, let us return to your Paradise. There I will tend to your wounds."

The Blemmye plucked a small table knife from his belt and scratched rapidly in the sand. "My fate is of no more consequence / I care only for my darling's children / though born in this unhappy place/ they are scions of a great and noble people."

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"Master, let us write of this together in some much better place."

The Blemmye brushed away her words with the palm of his hand. "I have touched my poor beloved for the last time in my life / How pitifully rare were our meetings / We sent each other word through the black gulfs and seas amid the stars / to understand one sentence was the patient work of years / her people and mine were mortal enemies / And yet she trusted me / She chose to become mine / She fled with me in exile to this distant unknown land / Now she has left me to face our dark fate alone / It was always her dear way to give her life for others / Alas my sweet correspondent has finally perished of her generosity."

The Blemmye tugged in fitful despair at his lacerated boots.

Resignedly, Hildegart knelt and pulled the torn boots from her Master's feet. His wounds were talon slashes, fearsome animal bites. She pulled the cotton wimple from her head and tore it into strips.

"I promised her that I would guard her children / sheltering them as I always sheltered her / That foolish vow has broken my spirit / I will fail her in my promise, for I cannot live without her / Her goodness and her greatness of spirit / She was so wise, and knew so many things / Great marvels I could never have guessed, known, or dreamed of / What a strange soul she had, and how she loved me / What wondrous things we shared together from our different worlds / Oh, how she could write!"

Sinan arrived. The Assassin's eyes were reddened with the fumes, but he had composed himself.

"What have you been doing?" Hildegart demanded, as she worked to bind the Blemmye's bleeding, toeless feet.

"Listen to this feat of verse!" Sinan declared. He lifted his parchment, cleared his throat, and began to recite. "'With my own eyes, I witnessed the corpses of the massacred! Lacerated and disjointed, with heads cracked open and throats split; spines broken, necks shattered; noses mutilated, hair colored with blood! Their tender lips were shriveled, their skulls cracked and pierced; their feet were slashed and fingers sliced away and scattered; their ribs staved in and smashed. With their life's last breath exhaled, their very ghosts were crushed, and they lay like dead stones among stones!'"

Hildegart's bloodied fingers faltered on the knot of her rough bandage. The sun beat against her bared head. Her ears roared. Her vision faded.

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When she came to, Sinan was tenderly sponging her face with water from his canteen. "You swooned," he told her.

"Yes," she said faintly, "yes, that overcame me."

"Of course it would," he agreed, eyes shining, "for those wondrous verses possessed me in one divine rush! As if my very pen had learned to speak the truth!"

"Is that what you saw in Hell?" she said.

"Oh no," he told her, "that was what I witnessed in the siege of Jerusalem. I was never able to describe that experience before, but just now, I was very inspired." Sinan shrugged. "Inside that ugly mine, there is not much to see. There is dark acrid smoke there, many chewed bones. The imps within, they screeched and rustled everywhere, like bats and lizards. And that infernal stench...." Sinan looked sidelong at the Blemmye's wounded shins. "See how the little devils attacked him, as he walked through the thick of them, to fetch out their dam."

Though the Blemmye did not understand Sinan's words, the tone of the Assassin's voice seemed to stir him. He sat up, his black eyes filmy and grievous. He took up his knife again, and carved fresh letters into the sand. "Now we will take the precious corpse of my beloved / and sink her to her last rest in this strange sea she loved so much. / This quiet lake was the kindest place to her of any in your world."

Sinan put his verses away, and pulled at one whitened limb of the Blemmye's ruined lover. The bony armor rocked and tilted like a pecked and broken Roc's egg. The wounded Blemmye stood on his bleeding feet, lifting and shoving at the wall of bone with all his failing strength. The two of them splashed waist-deep into the evil water.

As the skeleton sank into the shallows, there was a sudden stirring and skittering. From a bent corner of the shell, shaking itself like a wet bird, came a small and quite horrible young demon. It had claws, and a stinging tail, and a circlet of eyes like a spider. It hopped and chirped and screeched.

Sinan wisely froze in place, like a man confronting a leopard. But the Blemmye could not keep his composure. He snorted aloud and fled splashing toward the shore.

The small demon rushed after the Blemmye as if born to the chase. It quickly felled him to the salty shore. At once, it began to feed on him.

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Sinan armed himself with the closest weapon at hand: he tore a bony flipper from the mother's corpse. He waded ashore in a rush, and swung this bone like a mace across the heaving back of the imp. Its armor was as tough as any crab's, though, and the heavy blow only enraged it. The little demon turned on the Assassin with awful speed, and likely would have killed a fighter less experienced. Sinan, though, was wise enough to outfox the young devil. He dodged its feral lunges, striking down and cracking the vulnerable joints in its twitching, bony limbs. When the monster faltered, foaming and hissing, he closed on it with a short, curved dagger from within his robe.

Sinan rose at last from the young beast's corpse, his robes ripped and his arm bloodied. He hid his blade away again, then dragged the dead monster to the salt shore. There he heaved it with a shudder of loathing into the still water beside its mother.

Hildegart knelt beside the panting Blemmye. His wounds had multiplied.

The Blemmye blinked, faint with anguish. His strength was fading visibly, yet he still had something left to write. He scraped at the sand with a trembling fingertip. "Take me to my Paradise and bind my wounds / See to it that I live / I shall reveal to you great wonders and secrets / beyond the comprehension of your prophets."

Sinan took Hildegart by the arm.

"I'm no longer much concerned about our horses, my dear," he told her. He knelt and smoothed out their Master's writing. A spatter of his own blood fell on the sand beside the Blemmye's oozings.

"That ugly monster has hurt you, my brave hero!"

"Do you know how many times this poor old body of mine has known a wound?" Sinan's left arm had been badly scored by the creature's lashing tail. He gritted his teeth as she tied off his arm with a scarf. "What a joy that battle was, my darling. I have never killed anything that I wanted to kill so much."

The Blemmye propped his headless body on one elbow. He beckoned at them feebly. Hildegart felt a moment of sheer hatred for him, for his weakness, for his foolish yieldings to the temptations of darkness. "What it is that the Blemmye wants to write of now, these 'great secrets' that he promises us?"

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"It will be much the same as it was before," Sinan said with disgust. "That mystical raving about the Sun being only a star."

Hildegart shivered. "I always hated that!"

"The world is very, very old, he'll insist on that nonsense, as well. Come, let us help him, my dear. We shall have to patch the Master up, for there is no one else fit to do it."

"Thousands of years," Hildegart quoted, unmoving where she stood. "Then, thousands of thousands of years. And thousands, of thousands, of thousands. Then thirteen and a half of those units. Those are the years since the birth of the universe."

"How is it you can remember all that? Your skills at numeration are beyond compare!" Sinan trembled suddenly from head to foot, in an after-combat mix of rage, fear, and weariness. "My dear, please give me counsel, in your wisdom: Did his huge numbers ever make any sense to you? Any kind of sense at all?"

"No," she told him.

The Assassin looked wearily at the fainting Blemmye. He lowered his voice. "Well, I can fully trust your counsel in this matter, can't I? Tell me that you are quite sure about all that."

Hildegart felt a rush of affection for him. She recognized that look of sincere, weighty puzzlement on his face; he'd often looked like that in the days when they had played chess together, whiling away pleasant evenings as lord and concubine. It was Sinan who had taught her chess; Sinan had taught Hildegart the very existence of chess. Chess was a wonderful game, with the crippled Shah, and the swift Vizier, and all their valiant knights, stern fortresses and crushing elephants. When she began to defeat him at chess, he only laughed and praised her cleverness; he seemed to enjoy their game all the more.

"My dear, brave Sinan, I can promise you: God Himself doesn't need such infinities, not even for His angels to dance on the heads of pins." Hildegart felt light-headed without her wimple, and she ran her hands self-consciously across her braids. "Why does he think that numbers are some kind of reward for us? What's wrong with gold and diamonds?"

Sinan shrugged again, favoring his wounded arm. "I think his grief has turned his mind. We must haul him away from his darling now. We must

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put him to bed, if we can. No man can be trusted at the brink of his lover's grave."

Hildegart gazed with loathing at the demonic skeleton. The dense salt water still bore the she-monster up, but her porous wreck was drowning, like a boat hull riddled with holes. A dark suspicion rose within Hildegart's heart. Then a cold fear came. "Sinan, wait one moment longer. Listen to me now. What number of evil imps were bred inside that great incubus of his?"

Sinan's eyes narrowed. "I would guess at least a hundred. I knew that by the horrid noise."

"Do you remember the story of the Sultan's chessboard, Sinan? That story about the great sums." This was one of Sinan's Arabic tales: the story of a foolish sultan's promise to a cheating courtier. Just one grain of wheat on the first square of the chessboard, but two grains of wheat on the second, and then four on the third, and then eight, sixteen, thirty-two. A granary-leveling inferno of numbers.

Sinan's face hardened. "Oh yes. I do remember that story. And now I begin to understand."

"I learned that story from you," she said.

"My clever darling, I well remember how we shared that tale — and I also know the size of that mine within the earth! Ha-ha! So that's why he needs to feed those devils with the flesh of my precious pack horses! When those vile creatures breed in there, then how many will there be, eh? There will be hundreds, upon hundreds, piled upon hundreds!"

"What will they do to us?" she said.

"What else can they do? They will spill out into our sacred homeland! Breeding in their endless numbers, they will spread as far as any bird can fly!"

She threw her arms around him. He was a man of such quick understanding.

Sinan spoke in a hoarse whisper. "So, darling, thanks to your woman's intuition, we have found out his wicked scheme! Our course is very clear now, is it not? Are we both agreed on what we must do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I must assassinate him."

"What, now?"

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Sinan released her, his face resolutely murderous. "Yes, of course now! To successfully kill a great lord, one must fall on him like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. The coup de grâce always works best when least expected. So you will feign to help him to his feet. Then, without a word of warning, I will bury my steel blade between his ribs."

Hildegart blinked and wiped grains of salty sand from her cloak. "Does the Blemmye *have* ribs, Sinan?"

Sinan stroked his beard. "You're right, my dear; I hadn't quite thought that through."

But as they conspired together, the Blemmye himself rose from the bloodstained sand. He tottered and staggered into the stinging salts of the dead lake. His darling had failed to sink entirely from sight.

Half-swimming, their master shoved and heaved at the bony ridges and spars that broke the surface. The waters of the Dead Sea were very buoyant by nature, but the Blemmye had no head to keep above the water. He ignored their shouts and cries of warning.

There he sank, tangled in the heavy bones of his beloved. Minutes later, his drowned corpse bobbed to the surface like a cork.

AFTER THE DEATH of the Silent Master, life in the Holy Land took a swift turn for the worse. First, exotic goods vanished from the markets. Then trade faltered. Ordered records went unkept. Currencies gyrated in price. Crops were ravaged and villages sacked, caravans raided and ships sunk. Men no longer traded goods, or learned from one another; they were resolved upon massacre. Defeat after wave of defeat scourged the dwindling Christian forces. Relentlessly harassed, the Crusaders lurked and starved within their stone forts, or else clung fitfully to offshore ships and islands, begging reinforcements that were loath to come.

Sinan's Moslem raiders were the first to occupy the Blemmye's Paradise. Sinan had vaguely meant to do something useful with the place. The Assassin was a fiendish wizard whose very touch meant death, and his troops feared him greatly. But armies were low on discipline when loot was near. Soon they were breaking the plumbing, burning the libraries, and scraping at semi-precious stones with the blades of their knives.

Hildegart's own Crusader forces had arrived late at the orgy, but they

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were making up for lost time. The Christians had flung themselves on the Blemmye's oasis like wolves. They were looting everything portable, and burning all the rest.

Six guards dragged Hildegart into Sinan's great black battle tent. They threw her to the tasseled carpet.

The pains of battlefield command had told on the alchemist. Sinan's face was lined, and he was thinner. But with Hildegart as his captive, he brightened at once. He lifted her to her feet, drew his scimitar, and gallantly sawed the hemp ropes from her wrists. "How astonishing life can be!" he said. "How did you reach me amid all this turmoil?"

"My lord, I am entirely yours; I am your hostage. Sir Roger of Edessa offers me to you as the guarantee of the good behavior of his forces." Hildegart sighed after this little set speech.

Sinan seemed skeptical. "How unseemly are these times at the end of history! Your paladin Roger offers me a Christian holy woman for a hostage? A woman is supposed to be a pleasant gift between commanders! Who is this 'Roger of Edessa'? He requires some lessons in knightly courtesy."

Hildegart rubbed her chafed wrists. Her weary heart overflowed toward the Assassin in gushing confidence. "Sinan, I had to choose Roger of Edessa to command this expedition. Roger is young, he is bold, he despises death, and he had nothing better to do with himself but to venture forth and kill demonic monsters...."

Sinan nodded. "Yes, I understand such men perfectly."

"I myself forced Sir Roger to appoint me as your hostage."

"I still must wonder at his lack of gallantry."

"Oh, it's all a very difficult story, very. The truth is, Roger of Edessa gave me to you as a hostage because he hates me. You see, Sir Roger dearly loves my granddaughter. This granddaughter of mine is a very foolish, empty-headed girl, who, despite her fine education, also despises me bitterly. When I saw the grip that their unchaste passion had on the two of them, I parted them at once. I kept her safe in a tower in Tyre with my message birds.... Roger is a wandering adventurer, a freelance whose family fief was lost years ago. I had a much more prosperous match in mind for this young girl. However, even bread and water could not break her of her stupid habit of loving him.... It is her hand in marriage that

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Roger seeks above all, and for her silly kisses he is willing to face hell itself.... Do I tire you with all this prattling, Sinan?"

"Oh no, no, you never tire me," Sinan said loyally. He sat with a weary groan, and absently patted a plump velvet cushion on the carpet. "Please do go on with your exotic Christian romance! Your personal troubles are always fascinating!"

"Sinan, I know I am just a foolish woman and also a cloistered nun, but do grant me some credit. I, a mere nun, have raised an army for you. I armed all these wicked men, I fed them, I clothed them, I brought them here for you to kill those demons with.... I did the very best I could."

"That was a very fine achievement, sweet little Hudegar."

"I am just so tired and desperate these days. Since the dark word spread of our Silent Master's death, all my agents have fallen to quarreling. The birds no longer fly, Sinan, the birds go neglected and they perish. And when the poor birds do arrive, they bear me the most awful news: theft, embezzlement, bankruptcies, every kind of corruption.... All the crops are burned around Tyre and Acre, Saladin's fearsome raiders are everywhere in the Holy Land.... There is famine, there is pestilence.... The clouds take the shapes of serpents, and cows bring forth monsters.... I am at my wits' end."

-Sinan clapped his hands, and demanded the customary hostage cloak and hostage hat. Hildegart donned the official garments gratefully. Then Hildegart accepted a cool lime sherbet. Her morale was improving, since her Assassin was so kindly and dependable.

"Dearest Sinan, I must further inform you about this ugly band I have recruited for your daring siege of Hell. They are all Christians fresh off the boat, and therefore very gullible. They are Englishmen — well, not English — they are Normans, for the English are their slaves. These are lion-hearted soldiers, and lion-gutted, and lion-toothed, with a lion's appetites. I promised them much loot, or rather, I made Sir Roger promise them all that."

"Good. These savages of yours sound rather promising. Do you trust them?"

"Oh no, certainly not. But the English had to leave Tyre for the holy war anyway, for the Tyrians would not suffer them to stay inside the port. These English are a strange, extremely violent people. They are drunken,

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foul, rampaging, their French is like no French I ever heard...." Hildegart put down her glass sherbet bowl and began to sniffle. "Sinan, you don't know what it's been like for me, dealing with these dirty brutes. The decay of courtesy today, the many gross, impious insults I have suffered lately.... They are nothing at all like yourself, a gentleman and true scholar."

Despite all difficulty, Hildegart arranged a formal parley between Sinan and Sir Roger of Edessa. Like most of the fighters dying in the Holy Land, Roger of Edessa was a native. Roger's grandfather had been French, his grandmother Turkish, his father German and his mother a Greek Orthodox native of Antioch. His home country, Edessa, had long since fallen in flames.

Sir Roger of Edessa was a Turcopole, the child of Moslem-Christian unions. Roger wore a checkered surcoat from Italy, and French plate armor, and a Persian peaked cavalry helmet with an Arabian peacock plume. Sir Roger's blue eyes were full of lucid poetic despair, for he had no land to call his own. Wherever he went in the Holy Land, some blood relation was dying. The Turcopoles, the Holy Land's only true natives, were never considered a people to be trusted by anyone; they fought for any creed with indifference, and were killed by all with similar glee. Roger, though only twenty, had been fighting and killing since the age of twelve.

With Hildegart to interpret for him, Sir Roger and his boldest Englishmen inspected their new Moslem allies. Sinan's best efforts had raised a bare two hundred warriors to combat the fiends. Somewhere over the smoldering horizon, the mighty Saladin was rousing the Moslem faithful to fight yet another final, conclusive, epic battle with the latest wave of Western invaders. Therefore, heroic Moslem warriors willing to fight and kill demons were rather thin on the ground.

Word had also spread widely of the uniformly lethal fate of Sinan's suicide martyr assassins. Nevertheless, Sinan's occult reputation had garnered together a troop of dedicated fanatics. He had a bodyguard of Ismailis from a heretical madrassa. He had a sprinkling of Fatimid Egyptian infantry and their Nubians, and some cynical Damascenes to man his siege machines. These large destructive weapons, Sinan hoped, were his keys to a quick victory.

Roger examined the uncanny siege weapons with profound respect.

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The copper kettle-bellies of the Greek Fire machines spoke eloquently of their sticky, flaming mayhem. Much fine cedar of Lebanon had been sacrificed for the massive beams of the catapults.

Roger had been educated by Templars. He had traveled as far as Paris in their constant efforts to raise money for the wars. He was incurably proud of his elegant French. "Your Excellency, my pious troops are naturally eager to attack and kill these wicked cave monsters. But we do wonder at the expense."

Hildegart translated for Sinan. Although the wily Assassin could read French, he had never excelled at speaking it.

"My son, you are dealing with the Old Man of the Mountain here." Sinan passed Roger a potent handful of diamonds. "You and your fine boys may keep these few baubles. Inspire your troops thus. When the very last of these foul creatures is exterminated within that diamond mine, then we shall make a full inventory of their legendary horde of jewels."

Roger displayed this booty to his two top lieutenants. The first was a sunburned English sea captain with vast mustaches, who looked rather uneasy stuck on horseback. The second was a large crop-headed Norman rascal, shorn of both his ears. The two freebooters skeptically crunched the jewels between their teeth. When the diamonds failed to burst like glass, they spat them out into their flat-topped kettle-helmets. Then they shared a grin.

Sinan's Assassin spies had been keeping close watch over the cave. The small war council rode there together to reconnoiter the battle terrain. Hildegart was alarmed by the sinister changes that had taken place on the site. The mighty door of glass and iron had been riddled with pecked holes. Fresh bones strewed the ground, along with the corpse-pale, shed outer husks of dozens of crabs. All the vegetation was gnawed and stripped, and the dusty earth itself was chewed up, as if by the hooves of stampeding cattle.

Using their pennoned lances, Roger's two lieutenants prodded at a cast-off husk of pinkish armor. Roger thoughtfully rolled a diamond through his mailed fingertips. "O Lord High Emir Commander, this place is indeed just as you told us: a very mouth of Hell! What is our battle plan?"

"We will force the evil creatures into the open with gouts of fire. Then I place great confidence in your Christian knights who charge in heavy

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armor." Sinan was suave. "I have seen their shock tactics crush resistance in a twinkling. Especially from peasants on foot."

"My English knights will likely be sober enough to charge by tomorrow," Roger agreed. "Is our help required in moving all those heavy arbalests? I had some small acquaintance with those in Jerusalem."

"My Damascene engineers will acquit themselves to our general satisfaction," said Sinan. He turned his fine Arabian stallion. The party cantered from the cave.

"There is also the matter of our battle signals, Your Excellency," Roger persisted gamely. "Your minions prefer kettledrums, while my men use flags and trumpets...."

"Young commander, such a problem is easily resolved. Would you care to join me for this battle on the back of my elephant? With those flags, horns, drums...and our translator, of course."

Hildegart was so startled that she almost fell from her mare. "You have an elephant, Sinan?"

The Assassin caught the reins of her restive horse in his skilled hand. "My tender hostage, I brought you an elephant for the sake of your own safety. I hope you are not afraid to witness battle from atop my great beast?"

She met his eyes steadily. "Trusting in your wise care, I fear nothing, dread Prince!"

"How good you are."

Sinan's war elephant was the strangest creature to answer the call of his birds. The gray and wrinkled pachyderm had tramped some impossible distance, from the very shores of Hindustan maybe, arriving thirsty and lean at the Dead Sea, with his great padded feet wrapped in shabby, salt-worn leather. The elephant had many battle scars on the vast bulging walls of his hide, and a man-killing glare in his tiny red eyes. His ivory tusks were carefully grooved for the insertion of sharp sword blades. He wore thick quilted cotton armor, enough for a dozen tents. His towering sandalwood howdah had a brass-inlaid crossbow, pulled back by two stout whirring cranks, and with forty huge barbed bolts of Delhi steel, each one fit to pierce three men clean through. His Master was a very terror of the Earth.

Hildegart gazed up at the vast beast and back to Sinan with

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heartfelt admiration. How had the Assassin managed such a magnificent gesture?

On the next day, Sinan made her some formal gifts: an ivory-handled dagger, a helmet with a visor and veil to hide her beardless face, padded underarmor, and a horseman's long tunic of mail. It would simply not do for the common troops to see a woman taking to the battlefield. However, Sinan required her counsel, her language skills, and a written witness to events. Clad in the armor and helmet, she would pass as his boyish esquire.

The dense links of greased mail crunched and rustled on Hildegart's arms. The armor was so heavy that she could scarcely climb the folding ladder to the elephant's gleaming howdah. Once up, she settled heavily into place amid dense red horsehair cushions, towering over the battlefield giddily, feeling less like a woman than an airborne block of oak.

The battle opened with glorious bursts of colored flames. Sinan's sweating engineers kept up a steady pace, pumping gout after gout of alchemical fire down the black throat of Hell.

A half-dozen imps appeared at once at the cave mouth. As creatures inured to sulfur, they seemed less than impressed by the spurts of Greek Fire. The beasts had grown larger now, and were at least the size of goats.

At the sight of their uncanny capering, the cavalry horses snorted and stamped below their mailed and armored masters. A few cowards fled in shock at the first sight of such unnatural monsters, but their manhood was loudly taunted by their fellows. They soon returned shamefaced to their ranks.

A drum pounded, a horn blasted, and a withering fire of crossbow bolts sleeted across the dancing crabs. In moments every one had been skewered, hopping, gushing pale ichor, and querulously plucking bolts from their pierced limbs. The men all cheered in delight. Watching through the slits in her visor, Hildegart realized that the imps had no idea that weapons could strike from a distance. They had never seen such a thing done.

Sinan's stores of Greek Fire were soon exhausted. He then ordered his catapults into action. Skilled Damascenes with great iron levers twisted the horsehide skeins until the cedar uprights groaned. Then, with concussive thuds, the machines flung great pottery jars of jellied Naphth deep into the hole. Sullen booms echoed within.

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Suddenly there was a foul, crawling clot of the demons, an antlike swarm of them, vomiting forth in pain, with carapaces wreathed in dancing flames.

The creatures milled forth in an unruly burning mob. The fearless Ismaili Assassins, seeking sure reward in the afterlife, screamed the name of God and flung themselves into the midst of the enemy, blades flailing. The bold martyrs swiftly died, cruelly torn by lashing tails and pincers. At the sight of this sacrifice and its fell response, every man in the army roared with the rage for vengeance.

A queer stench wafted from the monsters' burning flesh, a reek that even the horses seemed to hate.

Trumpets blew. The English knights couched their lances, stood in their stirrups, and rode in shield to shield. The crabs billowed from the shock, with a bursting of their gore and a splintering of lances. The knights, slashing and chopping with their sabers, fell back and regrouped. Their infantry rushed forth to support them, finishing off the wounded monsters with great overhand chops of their long-handled axes.

A column of black smoke began to block the sky. Then a great, choking, roiling tide of the demons burst from their filthy hole. They had been poisoned somehow, and were spewing thin phlegm from the gills on their undersides. There were hundreds of them. They leapt over everything in their path, filled with such frantic energy that they almost seemed to fly.

In moments the little army was overrun, surrounded. The Damascenes died screaming at their siege machinery. Horses panicked and fell as lunging, stinging monsters bit through their knees. Stout lines of spear-carrying infantry buckled and collapsed.

But there was no retreat. Not one man left the battlefield. Even those who died, fell on the loathsome enemy with their last breath.

Men died in clumps, lashed, torn, shredded. At the howdah's rear, Sir Roger pounded a drumskin and shouted his unheard orders. The elephant, ripped and slashed by things no taller than his knees, was stung into madness. With a shattering screech from his curling sinuous nose, he charged with great stiff-legged earthshaking strides into the thickest of the enemy. As the towering beast lurched in his fury, Sinan kept up a cool fire from the howdah's crossbow. His fatal yard-long bolts pierced demons through, pinning them to the earth.

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A knot of angry demons swarmed up the elephant as if it were a moving mountain. The evil creatures seethed right up the elephant's armored sides.

Hildegart, quailing within her heavy helmet and mail, heard them crawling and scrabbling on the roof of the howdah as Roger and Sinan, hand to hand, lashed out around them with long bared blades.

Claws caught within the steel links of her chain mail and yanked her from the howdah. Along with the demons seizing her, she tumbled in a kicking, scrambling mass from the plunging elephant. They crashed and tumbled through a beleaguered cluster of Egyptians on horseback.

Hildegart lay stunned and winded as more and more of the foul creatures swarmed toward the great beast, their pick-like legs scrabbling over her. Chopped almost in half by the elephant's steel-bearing tusks, a demon came flying and crashed across her. It lay on her dying, and among its many twitching legs, its broken gills wheezed forth a pale pink froth.

Hildegart lay still as death, knowing that many survived battles that way. She was utterly terrified, flat on her back amid a flowing tide of jittering, chattering monsters, men's dying screams, curses, the clash of their steel. Yet there was almost a tender peace in such stillness...for she wanted for nothing. She only wished that she were somehow still in the howdah, together with dear Sinan, to wrap her arms around him one last time, to shield his body from his fate, even at the cost of her own life....

Suddenly, as often happened in battles, there was a weird lull. She saw the blue sky and a rising billow of poisoned smoke. Then the elephant came screaming and trampling over her, blinded, bleeding, staggering to its death. Its great foot fell and rose swiftly. It stamped her flat, and broke her body.

Coldness crept around her heart. She prayed in silence.

After some vague time she opened her eyes to see Sinan's torn and bloodied face inside his dented helmet.

"The day is ours," he told her. "We have killed all of them, save a very few that fled into the mine. Few of us survive — but none of them can be suffered to live. I have sworn a holy oath that they shall not trouble the next generation. My last two Assassins and I are walking into hell to settle them forever. We shall march into the very midst of them, laden with our very best bombs. That is a strategy that cannot fail."

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"I must take notes for our glorious history," she murmured. "You must write the verses for me. I long to read them so!"

The Assassin eased the helmet from her braided hair, and carefully arranged her limbs. Hildegart could not feel her own numbed legs, but she felt him lift her mailcoat to probe her crushed flesh. "Your back is broken, precious." With no more word than that — for the coup de grâce always worked best without warning — she felt a sharp, exciting pang through her ribs. Her Assassin had stabbed her.

He kissed her brow. "No gentleman would write one word about our history! All that sweetness was our secret; it was just for you and me."

The tattered pigeon carried an urgent message:

"MY DARLING: At the evil shores of a dead sea, I have survived a siege of such blood and hellish fire that I pray that no survivor ever writes of it. My command was ravaged. All who came to this land to serve God have died for Him, and even the imps of Satan have perished, leaving nothing but cold ashes and bones. My heart now tells me: you and I will never know a moment's happiness as man and woman unless we flee this dreadful Holy Land. We must seek some shelter far beyond the Gates of Hercules, or far beyond the Spice Islands, if there is any difference. We must find a place so distant no one will ever guess our origins. There I swear that I will cleave to you, and you only, until the day I die.

"Trust me and prepare yourself at once, my beloved, for I am coming to take you from your tower and finally make you mine. I am riding to you as fast as any horse will carry me. Together we will vanish from all ken, so that no man or woman will ever know what became of us."

The laden pigeon left the stone sill of the window. She fluttered to the floor, and pecked at the useless husks of a few strewn seeds. The pigeon found no water. Every door hung broken from every empty cage. The tower was abandoned, a prey to the sighing wind.

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FILMS

LUCIUS SHEPARD

BLADE RUNNER HAD A BABY

EVER SINCE Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, the dystopian future has been an object of fascination for filmmakers. Generally speaking, these films have fallen into two categories, the post-apocalyptic and the Orwellian, and, in recent years, as our view of the future has come increasingly to be defined by current political realities, hemmed in by ecological disaster and technological threat and a sharpening of the distinction between the haves and the have-nots, the latter has become predominant. Indeed, toss out the avalanche of cheapo post-apocalypse flicks such as *Steel Dawn*, *Cyborg*, et al., and their more expensive, equally dimwitted brethren like *Waterworld* and *The Postman*, and what remains are essentially variants on the Orwellian dystopia. It's as though *1984* blinded us to all other possibilities of social evolution, and we have been hellbent on making that dream come true (preferring it to apocalypse), because, barring a miracle, a scientific breakthrough or three that will enforce the egalitarian, it seems that our children are doomed to inhabit a corporate oligarchy of bleak dimension in which personal freedom is severely limited by technological oversight and upward mobility is all but impossible for most of the population.

Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* set the tone, if not the standard, for the type of film that illustrates this dreary scenario, spawning a number of imitations, and to that number, sadly, we must now add Michael Winterbottom's *Code 46*, which features, as did *Blade Runner*, a detective, a romance-noir, a genetic crime, and a gloomy near-future dominated by corporate interests.

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Winterbottom *(24 Hour Party People, The Claim, In This World, Jude)* has been something of a genre-jumper of late, focusing his significant talent on the Western, the documentary, the world of pop music, etc., and his take on the near future might well be the most persuasive of any thus far. In Winterbottom's day-after-tomorrow, cultural migration has resulted in a language that is basically English, but is salted with Spanish, French, and Arabic words, an international polyglot. Neither automotive style nor fashion has evolved (though there are capes designed to protect one from exposure to direct sunlight), but the gap between rich and poor has significantly widened. The privileged live in overcrowded, polluted cities enclosed in haze and surrounded by endless deserts (this due to an erosion of the ozone layer) where live the disenfranchised, an untouchable caste of stateless people who have no rights and little hope. We see them swarming the checkpoints on the outskirts of the cities, dressed in ragged Arab-style garments, attempting to sell cigarettes, pens, and such to citizens passing in and out, begging for "cover" in the form of papelles, a combination of passport, visa, and insurance (only those fortunate enough to possess such papers are allowed in the cities).

Presiding over all this misery is the monolithic Sphinx Corporation, and, as the movie opens, an investigator, a family man named William (underplayed to the point of somnolence by Tim Robbins), is dispatched from Seattle to the Shanghai office of the corporation's insurance agency to find out who, if anyone, on the inside is involved in the issuing of false papelles. William has been infected with an empathy virus that enables him to intuit peoples' thoughts and, in an entertaining scene, he interviews various workers, including a woman with a freckle fetish who considers *Anne of Green Gables* an erotic masterpiece, before concluding that the guilty party is a young woman named Maria Gonzalez (Samantha Morton). But as William listens to Maria recount a recurring dream, one she only has on her birthday and that she views as an harbinger of fate, he feels a powerful attraction to her and does not turn her in. He follows her from work, effects a meeting on the subway, and together they go to a karaoke club (a scene enlivened by Mick Jones of the Clash doing a karaoke version of his own "Should I Stay or Should I Go"), where she — aware that he

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knows of her guilt, aware also that he's attracted to her — allows him to watch as she passes false papelles to a customer. Winterbottom does a nice job of convincing us that William is falling in love with Maria (and she with him), using close-ups of Morton's expressive face shot from above, from Robbins's point of view (thank goodness, he chose not to use Robbins's face, because either empathy viruses dull the senses or else William is suffering from a severe case of jet lag). They return to Maria's apartment at dawn and make love. We know from the opening frames of the film that due to the widespread practice of cloning and gene splicing there is a great deal of concern about incest between men and women who are unaware that they're related, and a law, Code 46, exists to prohibit such contact. We don't need a gene map to know what has just happened.

This is all achieved at a leisurely pace, taking up more than a third of the movie's running time, but we have been kept interested by the authenticity of the world that Winterbottom has created. Shooting in Shanghai, Jaipur, and Dubai, contrasting ultra-modern high-rise towers and neon-bright streets with the desolate slums that surround them, he has persuaded us, without the use of expensive sets or CGI, that this is the blighted future that awaits us, a world whose sterile halls of power resemble LAX and are kept functioning by proles who dwell in slums. At this point, however, we expect a variance in tone, a quickening of pace to support the slight story, and, when none is forthcoming, when the movie continues to drift along, drift along, we are pushed to a distance and questions arise, question such as, Does one need a papelle to exit the theater?, and, Is Tim Robbins awake? The dreamlike *mise-en-scène*, the grainy digital images, and Morton's elegiac voiceover threaten to pull us under, and the trancey soundtrack (heavy on the Coldplay) contributes to the overmedicated emotional values implicit in the script.

Back in Seattle with his wife and son, William is informed by his superior that three people bearing the false papelles have died, including the man to whom he saw Maria give the papelles. She orders him to return to Shanghai on a twenty-four hour "cover" and settle the issue. He discovers that Maria has been taken to a clinic outside the city to deal with a "body issue"; at the clinic, he coerces a doctor into revealing that Maria has been guilty of a Code 46 violation, that she has

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been impregnated by an improper donor, the pregnancy has been terminated, and all memories of the affair have been removed. She does not remember him. He breaks into her apartment, secures some of her hair, and takes it to a lab for DNA analysis. It happens that he and Maria are a fifty percent match. William panics (Robbins tenses his jowls) and makes for the airport, intending to fly back to Seattle, but his cover has expired — he needs Maria to provide him with false papelles. He extracts her from the clinic and they go to her apartment; there he reacquaints her with their history. She agrees to get him the papelles and bring them to the airport, but when she arrives, William thinks better of it, he can't let go of her, and together they fly to Jebali, an Arabian port. This is the sort of irrational turn that good love stories take, that enlists our interest and our sympathy, but by this time the film has nearly run its course. We have endured eighty-some minutes of set-up, of foreplay, to get to ten minutes or so of the good stuff.

As part of her treatment at the clinic, Maria has been infected with a virus that makes her body "afraid" of William. In the movie's most affecting scene, he binds her hands to the bed in order for them to make love and, as they do, she writhes in alternating waves of fear and ecstasy. On waking, operating according to programmed instructions, Maria goes into zombie mode, walks downstairs and calls in a Code 46 violation. Though he knows this is going to happen, William does not try to stop her, opting instead for an ill-considered flight across the desert where the lovers encounter the fate that will separate them for all time.

The main problem with Winterbottom's movie is its flimsiness and its reliance on style, on the evocation of mood, to convey all things. It plays like a documentary with a little story attached, like a cyberpunk novel with all the exciting parts left out. Winterbottom seems determined to avoid action and he does so at the expense of his audience — I found myself yearning for a stray gunshot, a fistfight in the background, two people bumping into each other, anything to break the monotony, the slow, step-by-step expository grind of the picture. Incest of such an incidental sort is not much upon which to hang a tale, yet the basic story, that of doomed lovers cast against the grain of repressive society, has been done successfully before. Perhaps

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Winterbottom could have told the story non-linearly or at least layered in the exposition...perhaps that would have moved things along at a faster clip. Perhaps if he had chosen a more animated actor for a leading man, that would have claimed our attention — even at the heights of passion, Robbins appears on the verge of passing out and in opposition to the punkish, energetic Morton, he comes off as something of a docile, paternal figure and not as a man motivated by an emotion sufficiently powerful to cause him to risk everything (though in fairness to him, Winterbottom seems far more interested in Morton, giving her all the best lines.)

There's a lot to like about *Code 46*. The cinematography, by Alwin H. Kuchler and Marcel Zyskind, is superb; the script, by Frank Cottrell Boyce *(The Claim, 24 Hour Party People)* is intelligent, though — as noted — it has pacing problems. Moreover, this is the kind of little story, a story about Mr. and Mrs. Brown, that is needed to counteract the vast wave of comic book superheroes, video game makeovers, acid-drooling aliens, and Jasons-versus-Godzillas that is threatening to define genre cinema. But Winterbottom's documentarian approach verges on the sleep-inducing, and the fact that this is all terribly familiar, that the science fiction concepts with which he is dealing have been worked and reworked ever since Orwell's protagonist Winston stumbled upon his secret room...well, there's just not enough new and innovative here to mark his film as more than an interesting failure.

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On our message board, the subject comes up frequently of how to write a cover letter for a story submission. Perhaps one day Ms. Friesner will give a seminar on this subject, for in our Friesner file we find paragons of business correspondence such as, "Love! Betrayal! Frogs! What more could you ask for!!" and the classic, "No animals were harmed in the writing of this story, though my cat is looking at me funny." (That one also noted that "As today marks my daughter's twenty-first birthday, I return to nailing her shoes to the floor.")

When Ms. Friesner dropped this new story in the mail, she noted "This time I would like to blame the British Museum, specifically their section on ancient Sumeria, as well as Larry Gonick, creator of The Cartoon History of the Universe, *for his obvious-yet-overlooked observation that in any large gathering of people, there's always some guy who has to be last in line." Now, who said the last shall be first?*

Last Man Standing

By Esther M. Friesner

THE DAY WAS HOT, THE SUN was merciless, but still the line stretched all the way from the Great King's burial pit outside the walls, back through the city gates of Uruk, and almost to the base of the temple of Inanna. To either side of the causeway, soldiers in their full bronze-accented bib-and-tucker stood stiffly on guard, simultaneously keeping the gawking riffraff at bay and the procession participants in line. From time to time the broiling rays of the great sun god, Lord Utu, would get the better of one of them and he'd topple face-forward into the dust with a merry clang. That was the signal for a pair of young priests-in-training to scuttle out of nowhere, like scorpions in loincloths, and drag the unconscious man away, the gods alone knew where.

"The pit," said Namtar from his place at the very end of the line. "Trust me, that's where he'll wind up, the sorry onion-muncher. Just like the rest of us." The line edged forward and dutifully he moved with it. "The priests will say it's a sign from the gods — and what *isn't* a sign from the gods, with them? — a sign that the poor schmuck of a soldier was so

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overcome by grief at the loss of our beloved king that he wanted to go into the afterlife with him. The only thing the luckless loser *really* wanted was a cool drink of beer to take the heat off, but nothing like that would ever cross our priests' minds, no sir! Not unless they're the ones who're thirsty." The line moved again and Namtar shuffled along with it.

"Shh!" said the man ahead of him. "We're not supposed to be talking. This is a solemn occasion. Kings don't die every day."

"More's the pity," Namtar replied. A small, sharp realization having to do with the consequences attending the death of kings wrinkled its way across his brow. "Oh," he said as the light belatedly dawned. "More *is* the pity, damn it, and it's all for myself. Why couldn't that royal rat-kisser live forever? Or at least long enough for *me* to die of old age first? That lousy, stinking, miserable, selfish — "

"You there!" One of the guards along the roadside decided it was a good time to put on a show for the civilians. "You, the last one, be quiet!"

"Oh, I don't think so," Namtar said, shaking his head slowly. His towering ceremonial headdress with its clinking golden lozenges and sprays of bright feathers teetered shakily from even such a small movement. "Not just yet, Soldier Boy. I'm going to talk all I like, while I've still got the power. And what are *you* going to do about it? Pull me out of this line? Kill me?" His laughter rang out over the roofs of Uruk, stiff and hollow as a bundle of clattering reeds.

The soldier was young and eager to prove something, though he was a little foggy on the details concerning what that something might be and to whom he needed to prove it. Nevertheless: "Listen, slave, there's worse things than death!"

"Are there now?" Namtar's dark face showed an affable smile. "In that case I suppose I should count myself lucky. Huzzah, huzzah, when I reach the end of this accursed procession, I'm only going to die. What a treat! Why, it's such a stroke of good fortune that it's *too* good for a mere slave like me. I am not worthy. Hey, I'll tell you what, Soldier Boy: Let's switch places, you and me. I'll go off on a quest to find that fate worse than death you're jabbering about and you go into the pit in my place and enjoy the full benefits of the Gilgamesh Early Retirement Plan for Slaves, Concubines, and Show Folk. I might have to pull a few strings to get you in, though — you look too arrogant to be a slave, you'd probably fail the

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concubine physical, and as for being a royal entertainer, hmmm.... Tell you what, let me hear you sing a few verses of *Love Me, Baby, Like a Sacred Temple Whore* and then we'll talk."

"Insolence!" The young soldier leveled his spear at Namtar's grinning face.

"You bet your life, Soldier Boy," Namtar replied. "How about punishing me for it? Pull me out of this line and make me do something worse than lapping up a mouthful of hemlock and dying in the dark. *That'll* teach me! Make me go out into the wide world to brave unnatural dangers, fight monsters, defy the gods themselves, all that sort of legendary blah-blah. Funny thing: The royal dead guy in the pit was really big on perilous quests, but somehow he always managed to make it home alive. Fancy that. Oh well, maybe he did meet a fate worse than death. I've seen his queen."

The soldier shouted something as obscene as it was ungrammatical and lunged for the slave, spear now aimed straight at the defiant fellow's belly. Namtar didn't move. His provoking smirk had grown into a full-fledged grin of triumph. He was going to die, but he was going to do it on *his* terms. Under the circumstances, he was happy to claim his small victories where he found them.

His grin faded the instant that a quartet of priests sprang from the sidelines, intercepted the soldier, and yanked the spear from his hands. The crowd cheered. It wasn't that they'd taken the slave's side — they would have cheered just as lustily if the soldier had managed to skewer Namtar — they simply liked a good show.

"Disgrace!" the senior priest thundered at the shamefaced soldier. "Unspeakable piece of dog vomit, is this how you honor the passing of Lord Gilgamesh? By diminishing his household for the afterlife? For shame! Good help is so hard to find these days."

The soldier threw himself face down on the dusty causeway bricks at the senior priest's feet, babbling excuses. The other three men-of-the-loincloth looked to their leader, awaiting some sign as to what he desired them to do next. Meanwhile the procession took another few steps forward, leaving that small group of embroiled souls behind. This slight movement caught the senior priest's eye and thus brought inspiration. His smile would have made a buzzard molt.

"Behold, it is not fitting that we, who serve the ever-living gods,

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should soil our hands with the business of chastising mortals who are not employed in the city temples. We shall not punish you." He watched carefully as the soldier's whole body went slack with relief before adding: "For your disruption of Lord Gilgamesh's funeral and your attempt to cheat our departed king of the full complement of servants he deserves in the afterlife, you are to take this man's place in line so that Lord Gilgamesh himself may chastise you as he sees fit. Now rise! Rise, walk, and descend into the tomb with your master. Oh, and when you see him in the afterlife, be sure to tell him that Ziqarru and all the boys at the Enki temple say hello."

A heartbreaking groan broke from the condemned soldier's lips. He shook in every limb like a victim of marsh fever and tried to dig his nails into the baked clay bricks of the royal road as if preparing to resist all efforts to drag him to his feet. He only succeeded in breaking his nails off to the quick. The chief priest looked at two other soldiers doing crowd control duty and nodded ever so slightly. It was enough. They almost trampled each other in their haste to haul their unlucky former comrade to his feet and drag him into his newly assigned spot at the end of the end-of-the-line line.

As for Namtar, he sighed and shuffled into place behind the soldier, only to feel the heavy hand of the senior priest drop onto his shoulder. "Not you, dog," said the shave-pate.

"Not me what?" A suspicion tickled the edges of Namtar's mind, but he'd lived as a slave long enough to know better than to entertain hope. Optimism was a luxury, most given to those who needed it least.

"You're out of the procession. This one is sent to Lord Gilgamesh in your place. Begone."

Namtar frowned and didn't move. It wasn't that he didn't trust the priests...well, all right, it *was* that he didn't trust the priests. He knew them too well to trust them. Their easy lives at the very top of the social ziggurat — which they shared grudgingly with the kings of Uruk — gave them plenty of leisure. In some, leisure breeds verse, art, great scientific discoveries; in others, boredom and a subsequent taste for malice, just to stir things up. It was a deep shame that no one had seen fit to invent a Sumerian rhyming dictionary, or Uruk might have witnessed more bad poetry but fewer capricious deaths.

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"So what you're saying is that I can go?" Namtar asked. The priest nodded. "Just like that. I'm out of the parade, I don't need to go into the royal tomb, no big sloshy bowl of liquid death to drink, that's *it*?"

The priest nodded again, more vigorously. He had the piqued expression of a man who is being cross-examined in excruciating detail about the painfully obvious. "I don't know where you come from, fool, but in my old neighborhood we know the meaning of *begone*. Must I spell it out for you? Three triangles pointing right, two triangles pointing left on stems, two triangles pointing up without stems, four plain stems and a triangle pointing down: *Begone!* And if you are worried about your status, give it no thought — I'm sure you're quite good at that. From this day, you are a free person. The man who took your place takes with it your designation as a royal slave. For things to occur otherwise would shake the solemn rites to their foundations."

"Free?" Namtar's face beamed. "I'm free? Truly? That's very generous of you temple boys, giving away someone else's property like that, even if he is dead. Not that I'm complaining," he added quickly.

The senior priest sneered. "It is a matter of propriety, not generosity. The calculations as to the correct number of attendants to accompany Lord Gilgamesh to the afterlife were done in a painstaking, precise manner. Just as the wisest of our priesthood scan the night skies in order to glean wisdom from the movement and number of the stars, so too have they determined that there are certain mystic, sacred numbers here on Earth whose sovereignty must be respected in order for our unworthy rituals to please the gods."

"In other words, the tomb only sleeps thirty-two," Namtar concluded. "And that's not counting the horses." He smiled. "Far be it from me to upset the gods' sacred numbers. I'm as begone as they come." He walked off at a jaunty pace, pausing only once when he turned, pointed to his glittering headdress, and asked: "Do I get to keep the hat?"

A few sips later, as the bowl of hemlock drains, Namtar found himself sitting in a cool, familiar tavern, drinking from a clay jug full of thick, gritty beer through a battered bronze filtering straw. He had not been permitted to keep the hat; such treasures were not to be squandered on riffraff. Still, he felt pretty good about the way his morning had turned out.

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Lord Gilgamesh's ongoing funeral procession just outside the tavern's open door might as well have been on the moon.

"Another one here, Puabi!" he called out to the beer woman. "Keep 'em coming. I never knew that becoming a free man could make you work up a thirst."

The beer woman was a stocky, dish-faced creature with arms like pier pilings. She and Namtar were old friends, and her tavern was the only one he frequented on those days when his late master permitted the royal slaves a taste of carefully controlled liberty. There had even been a time or two (or seventeen) when the pair of them had shared a satisfying measure of beer-fueled fleshly comfort during the Feast of Inanna, all quite amicable as far as casual orgiastic sex goes, though you wouldn't know it from the way Puabi was glowering at him now. She waddled over to Namtar's table, a fresh jug of her best beer in hand, and slammed it down before him so hard that the clay cracked. Already fairly drunk, Namtar stared at the dribbling jug like a man in pain.

"Oh, now that's too bad, Puabi," he cried, slurring his words slightly. "That's a waste, a shameful waste of good beer. You should learn to be more careful."

"And you should learn to be grateful that I broke the jug on the table and not on your thick head!" Puabi's eyes glittered with rage. "Drink up what's left and get out of my house! If you ever show your miserable face here again, I'll smash it with a brick, see if I don't!"

Namtar thought he understood why Puabi the beer woman was angry with him. "Look, darlin', it's true that I can't pay for this round — Stupid priest didn't lemme keep the hat — but I'm good for it. I'm a free man now! Whatever I earn, I keep. They were sending me along with Lord Gilgamesh as a spare pottery-maker, just in case one day the king says *Hey! I know I'm dead, but I sure could use a dozen new drinking cups. You never know who's going to drop by in the Land of Darkness and Ashes.* It takes two experienced potters to fill a rush order like that, me and Ibi-Sin. Eh, Ibi can handle it. He was way ahead of me in line: He's probably with the king right now, getting a leg up on things. As for me, there's always work for potters among the living; I'll get a job and pay you back before you know it!"

It was amazing how much pain a little thing like a bronze beer straw

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could inflict on the adult human body when wielded by the hands of a seasoned beer woman. By the time Namtar was able to open his eyes and uncurl ever so slightly from the fetal position he'd assumed on the floor, Puabi had gotten her hands on another full jug of beer. She held it high overhead and it didn't take a temple mathematician to figure out that its intended trajectory had Namtar's head for a target.

"Wha— what did I say?" The former slave clutched his skull protectively with both hands. Suddenly he was feeling far too sober for comfort.

"Are you *that* stupid?" the beer woman countered.

"Yes, according to the priest who told me to begone."

"Priests!" When disgusted, Puabi could spit like a camel. Several of the other tavern patrons ducked as the gob hit the far wall. "Don't get me started on priests. Just because they are heartless, must we all be so? Bah, but why am I chastising you?" Slowly she lowered the jug. Rage left her face, leaving behind only weary helplessness. "You really don't know what you've done, do you? I might as well blame a stool for keeping a priest's rump out of the dung pile it deserves. The stool only does what it was made to do. You are no better than that. Get up." She toed Namtar's sandaled foot roughly. "I owe you an apology, but I'll give you another beer instead. Only a fool tries pounding wisdom into a cabbage." She waited only until Namtar was back in his seat before thrusting the beer jar at him and trudging off into the back room of the tavern.

Namtar stared at the jug in his hands, at the doorway that had swallowed Puabi, and at the other customers. "Does anyone here know what that was all about?" he asked, bewildered.

"You've got me there." The man who spoke reeked of sheep. "Fun to watch, though."

The well-dressed merchant across from him at the little tavern table reached over and slapped his head. "Stupid shepherd!" he snapped. "If you lived among civilized folk and had a wife who didn't bleat, you'd know this is all about Puabi's sister Sabit."

"And how should I know that?" the shepherd said, cradling the side of his head and eyeing the merchant warily. "I've only come into the city three days ago."

"Yes, and spent most of that time here, either propping up a table or snoring under it." The merchant was apparently one of those people who

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are very good at looking down their noses at those they deem their social and economic inferiors. It was fortunate that he had such a large nose for the purpose.

"It was a good year for sheep and a bad one for beer out where I live," the shepherd replied. "Can you blame me for wanting to drink up — I mean, to make up for lost time?"

"Perhaps if you spent a small share of that time using your ears instead of your gullet, you'd have noticed that our hostess passed every one of those days either weeping as she worked or swearing sky-shaking oaths against Lord Gilgamesh, the priests, and every god and goddess Uruk harbors."

The shepherd shrugged. "I can't say I noticed. Women are always weeping or cursing about something."

This time the slap that rattled his teeth came from Namtar's hand. Cursing and weeping, the shepherd gathered up his belongings and left the tavern.

"Friend, what's this you say?" Namtar turned imploring eyes to the merchant, his fingers linked in an attitude of supplication. "Three days? But — but three days ago was when Lord Gilgamesh died. Why should his death make her curse and weep? She loathed him ever since he took her little sister Sabit into his household as a — as a — " The words died on his lips. Suddenly Namtar understood. The merchant deigned to give the former slave a patronizing nod.

" — as a royal handmaiden. As a *favorite* royal handmaiden. Which was why, when the time for Lord Gilgamesh's funeral arrangements came — "

" — the queen put Sabit's name on the list of death-offerings!" Namtar's eyes went wide. "I *thought* I recognized her when we were all in the temple courtyard getting our jingly hats, but there was such a crowd, I wasn't sure. Oh no. Poor Sabit. Poor Puabi. No wonder she hates me: I escaped her sister's fate." Namtar heaved a sigh that would have inspired envy in Enlil, god of the winds.

The merchant smirked. "Oh, stop pretending that you care. You certainly didn't give a second thought to that soldier who's been condemned in your place. If you'd had the choice between saving your own life and saving Sabit's, we both know what you'd have done."

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"That's not so!" Namtar cried with all the force of a man trying to outshout the unpalatable truth. "I didn't even know Sabit was in line! If I had known, I'd have told the priests to spare her instead of me, I *would!* She's scarcely more than fifteen, poor child, and I'm an old man pushing twenty-seven. The stupid priests and their holy numbers would have been satisfied, she'd get to live, Puabi would rejoice, and — and — and — !" He was spitting foam-flecks of indignation, waving his arms to all quarters of the tavern, and generally making a scene. The merchant observed all this with a speculative eye.

At last Namtar subsided and said, "And none of that's possible now. It's too late. The royal handmaidens were at the front of the funeral procession. Sabit must have drunk from the bowl of oblivion and gone to her doom by now. There's nothing I can do about it."

Something scraped across the wooden tabletop. The merchant had shoved another clay jug toward Namtar. "Want to bet?" he said.

There was a sudden flash of green light, a wild wind like the breath of a thousand demons, and the goddess Inanna burst from her mortal disguise before the startled eyes of Puabi's customers, most of whom fainted on the spot.

Not so Namtar. He merely wet himself. The goddess's nose twitched with distaste. "Mortals," she said to no one in particular before swirling her rainbow-colored robes around the former slave and whisking him away.

"Where are we?" Namtar asked, peering into the darkness.

"My sister's realm," Inanna replied. Namtar thought he discerned an almost human note of fear in the goddess's voice. He wasn't at all surprised: He knew the stories.

When Inanna's favorite mortal lover died, the goddess of love and war determined to bring him back from the land of the dead, a land ruled over by her sister Ereshkigal. Dressed in her finest robes, decked with her most precious ornaments, Inanna descended into the land of darkness, her dainty gold-sandaled feet itching to kick her sister's butt and reclaim her man.

But this was not to be. At every one of the many gateways barring the road to the dark lands of the dead, Inanna had been compelled by forces

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greater than her own godhood to give up her adornments and her garments, one after the other, until at last she came before Ereshkigal's awful throne naked and helpless.

Ereshkigal beheld Inanna brought before her in such lowly state and did what any sister worth her sibling rivalry would do: She killed her. But the ways of the gods are not the ways of men. Though the death of gods is sometimes unavoidable — whether to fulfill a prophecy, to respect some hidden rule of the cosmos, to get mortals to sit up and pay attention during temple services, or simply to make for a better story — it can also be a mere temporary inconvenience, like cat-sitting. Heavenly strings were pulled, divine deals were struck, and Inanna was brought back to life.

Now she had returned to the land of the dead and she'd brought Namtar with her. Why would the goddess of love and war come back so willingly to the scene of her most degrading defeat? The former slave couldn't figure it out if his life depended on it (which he very much hoped it did *not*).

"Radiant One, why have we come here?" he asked, his voice trembling almost as much as his limbs.

"To make things right," Inanna replied. "Puabi the beer woman has always been one of my most devoted worshippers. Bringing her sister back from the dead is the least I can do for her."

"No, the *least* you can do is guarantee that her beer will never go sour. Bringing her sister back from the dead is closer to the *most* you can do end of things. Meaning no disrespect, Radiant One," he added quickly. "Even so, that fails to explain why I am here."

"Oh, you?" The goddess was quite cheerful about it all. "I thought you knew. The senior priest explained it, or tried to. It's that holy numbers thing. See?"

Namtar's eyes had gone so wide it was impossible for him *not* to see. An icy finger of dread traced its way up his spine, around his throat, down the center of his chest, and didn't stop until he felt the contents of his kilt shriveling up like a bunch of grapes in a sandstorm.

"You've brought me here to swap my life for Sabit's," he said.

The goddess patted him on the cheek and smiled. "Aren't you smart. Now don't give me *that* look, dear heart: You yourself said you'd have traded places with her if it wasn't too late."

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"But it *was* too late!" Namtar's agonized cry rang out so loudly that it disturbed whole flocks of disembodied souls. The shadowy reaches of the underworld reverberated with the fluttering, chittering sound. Inanna's face went pale.

"Oh, wonderful," she muttered. "That's done it. Stupid mortal. I'd hoped we could find Sabit and effect the trade quickly and quietly, no one the wiser, but now you've gotten *her* attention."

There was no need to specify who Inanna meant by *her*. In the land of the dead, there could be only one: Souls flew up like dry leaves in a whirlwind before the coming of their grim and dire lady, Ereshkigal.

Namtar cowered, but did not cover his eyes. The presence of Ereshkigal was awesome; he could not look away. And why would he want to? She was beautiful as only a goddess can be beautiful, with the same unsettling allure as the unknown reaches of the Southern Sea, the heart-stopping power and fascination of a heaven-shaking thunderstorm. She wasn't as beautiful as Inanna, but Namtar would not have rolled her off his sleeping mat for eating onions.

Ereshkigal stood before her sister, the spirits of the dead clustering at her back, and pointed one hennaed finger at Inanna. "Who sent for *you*?" she demanded.

Inanna bit her lower lip and tried to hold onto some scrap of her divine dignity, but the tales told of her enforced sojourn in the netherworld were all true. She remembered every painful moment of that dreadful ordeal, excluding only her stint as a corpse. She threw herself facedown at Ereshkigal's feet; every particle of her glorious body seeming to thrum with the realization that perhaps coming here with only a scrawny mortal for an escort had *not* been one of her better ideas. Hands clapped over her head, she muttered something unintelligible.

This did not satisfy her sister. "Answer, worm!" she shouted. "Why have you come before me? Have you done something stupid with another mortal lover? Is *this* he?" She gave Namtar a cursory you've-got-to-be-kidding look before glaring at Inanna once more. "And why have you not come into my realm by the proper route, through the gates of passage? You still have your ornaments, your garments, your — Ooooh, nice sandals. Can I try them on?"

Namtar watched while Ereshkigal stripped the golden sandals from

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her unprotesting sister's feet. They were too small for her, which put her in a fouler mood than before. Yet though Ereshkigal's scowl was black as week-old blood, Namtar was suddenly no longer in the least afraid. A revelation came, akin to that which had possessed him back in the living world when he had defied the unlucky soldier. His spirit embraced the serene self-confidence that came not from bravery nor even bravado, but from the firm conviction that once again he had nothing whatsoever left to lose.

I'm already in the Land of Dust and Ashes, he thought. *What more can this goddess do to me? Send me to the Land of Even More Dust and Additional Ashes?* And with this knowledge at his back, he stood tall and spoke up:

"O Queen Ereshkigal, great lady of the dead, I am Namtar the potter. I am the one whose prayers invoked your sister, the goddess Inanna. It's on my account that she has come before you."

Ereshkigal frowned. "A potter's prayers? That doesn't sound like the sort of incentive to motivate my sister. Are you sure you're *just* a potter?"

"Well, I used to be a royal slave too, but that more or less ended when Lord Gilgamesh died," Namtar said, spreading his hands in a that's-life-what-can-you-do? gesture.

"Gilgamesh...." No one could hiss a name with more venom than the goddess of the dead. The very earth rumbled with her wrath. "Oh, it was indeed a great day when that unspeakable blowhard fell into my clutches." She clenched her hands so tightly that they went from pale brown to bloodless white, just in case Namtar didn't get the idea.

"I take it you were never too fond of him?" the former slave inquired.

"And I take you were never too bright?" the goddess countered. "A curse upon the head of Gilgamesh! He sought the means by which mortals might cheat me of my final due. He quested through the world in search of eternal life!"

Namtar noted that when Ereshkigal got really angry like that, little veins popped out across her forehead and blood flowed from her eyes. Wisely he decided not to mention this, in case the lady were sensitive about her appearance. Instead he replied, "True, but the important thing to bear in mind is that he didn't *succeed.* Oh, he found the Flower of Immortality, but much good that did him. The stupid ox set it down for

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a moment and a snake gobbled it right up! And then he died — Lord Gilgamesh, not the snake — so that pretty much took him out of the questing game permanently. You've got to learn to see the brighter side of things, O Queen of the Dead."

"The point is not that Gilgamesh failed in his quest." Ereshkigal snarled like a dyspeptic lion. "The point is that he gave you lowly human slime *ideas*. He did not succeed in claiming immortality, but he was the first to *try*. It's his fault that now the world teems with hordes of copycat mortals all convinced that perhaps one of them will succeed where he failed. Thanks to him, you miserable vermin have *hope*. You cling to it in life and some of you are still grasping the last few threads of it to your rotting bosoms when you descend into the Land of Dust and Ashes. Have you ever *listened* to some of those optimistic idiots? They refuse to spend eternity quietly eating misery and drinking despair. Instead they wander through the shadows telling one another that this is just a temporary setback, that my realm is not endless, that my influence is not immortal, that a time and a day and a god will come who will see things *their* way! I have even caught some of them fluttering here and there in the darkness singing — *singing!* And if I ever lay hold of the jackass who buried that accursed harp-maker with all of those instruments and supplies enough to make more, I'll kill — Er, I'll tell him what I think of him. Hope! Joy! Harps! Singing! Is that any way to run an afterlife?"

Namtar clucked his tongue sympathetically. He even made so bold as to step up to the overwrought goddess and pat her on the shoulder. "I can see that we've come to you at a bad time," he said. "We've overstayed our welcome. We don't want to be a bother. Why don't we just go?" He tried to suit the action to the words, but it only took him a few steps before he remembered that he didn't know the way out. He returned to where Inanna still lay facedown in the dust and gently shook her. "Radiant One, if you could just point me in the right direction — " he began.

Inanna sat up so fast that she sent Namtar tumbling. The same revelation that had given him courage apparently had made a second housecall, for the goddess of love and war looked ready to embody the latter. Divine thoughts are unreadable by mere mortals, yet Namtar believed he could tell that Inanna was thinking *Why am I so afraid of this bitch? She already killed me once — true, it was kind of boring and smelly*

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and did there have *to be so many maggots up my nose? — but I got better. If that's all she's got, it's nowhere near enough to stop me!*

"O my sister, waste no more of your time jawing with that unworthy mortal," Inanna declared, clambering to her feet. "He lies like a dead donkey in the marketplace. Our coming here was none of his doing. As if I would heed the prayers of a mere potter, and a slave at that!"

"Well, you've been known to do dumber things," Ereshkigal said. "But usually because you were stupid-in-love at the time. If you love him, of course you'll answer his prayers. Prayers or not, someone I could mention will be spending a lot of time on her knees." She uttered a nasty laugh.

Inanna snorted. "Does *that* look like something I could love?" She waved one hand at Namtar and didn't bother to conceal her scorn.

"Hey!" the potter protested, but the goddesses were no longer paying him any mind. Snide remarks by Ereshkigal were countered with personal attacks from Inanna and followed by simple name-calling on both sides. Unless Namtar missed his guess, the divine sisters were actually enjoying the mutual flinging of figurative sheep-poop. Muttering insults against them both, he shambled off to sit among the dead.

When the goddesses ran out of slurs to heap upon one another, Inanna finally got down to the business of explaining the real reason why she'd brought Namtar from Puabi's tavern.

" — a soldier, young and strong and handsome, can you believe it? They saved the life of *that* puny creature and put the poor, darling, *gorgeous* soldier into the death line in his place. And for what? For nothing! Stupid priests. I'm going to slap a plague of leprosy on them when I get back, see if I don't! And boils. Definitely boils. Priests hate boils."

"You always did have a thing for men in uniform," Ereshkigal said, chuckling. "Let me guess about this soldier of yours: Big spear?"

Inanna just licked her lips, which sent her sister into peals of laughter so freighted with obscene meaning as to make a bunny blush. "And it's not *fair*," the goddess of love and war went on. "It's *wasteful*. I would have done something about it earlier, but I couldn't just pluck him out of the royal funeral procession."

Ereshkigal nodded. "The mystic, sacred numbers. Of all the things for those priests to get right about how the cosmos works, it had to be the bit about the mystic, sacred numbers. Talk about dumb luck!"

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Namtar listened as the sister-goddesses jawed on. "So that's it," the potter muttered, drawing his knees up to his chin. "Puabi's prayers my *ass*; the celestial slut just wanted to get her paws on Soldier Boy. She wasn't going to swap my life for Sabit's at all!"

"You're just figuring that out now?" The words came from the gathered darkness at Namtar's right hand and were so soft and airy that at first he wasn't sure he'd heard them.

"Who's there? Who are you?" he asked. It was a fair question. The inhabitants of Ereshkigal's dreary realm retained no semblance of their discarded bodies. They were little more than winged shadows, gray as the ashes that were the goddess's preferred medium for interior decoration.

The shade in question oared its left wing rapidly, so much so that it scooped up enough air and launched it with enough power to convey the impression of a light, companionable punch to Namtar's upper arm. "Who do you *think* would want to strike up a chat with you down here, silly? It's me, Sabit."

"Ohhhh, Sabit. Of course, of course, now I recognize you. Why, I'd know you anywhere." As he offered up that gallant lie to the featureless shade beside him, Namtar rubbed the back of his head, a nervous gesture. "Er, Puabi says hello."

A giggle rippled through the winged ghost. "Puabi says nothing of the sort. My sister is crying her eyes out. She misses me terribly, she's terrified that none of her customers will return to her tavern since Inanna staged that garish scene when she yanked you out of there, and she's deeply sorry she did all of those ugly things to you with the beer straw."

"How do you know — ?" Namtar began.

"Death opens many gates," Sabit's shade intoned solemnly. Then she made a rude sound, though Namtar was damned if he could figure out how and with what she did it. "That's what those stupid priests would say. The truth is, once you're dead, the gods grant that the living world and all its secrets become an open clay tablet to you. And why not? It's not as though you can *do* anything with the information."

"So you know that I — ?"

" — never would have volunteered to take my place in the death pit line? Of course." Sabit's ghost gave Namtar another playful slap with her wing. "I'd have done the same thing in your position, grabbed my life and

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run like wildfire through a barley field. Why would anyone sensible be in a hurry to come *here*?"

As she spoke, Namtar noticed that a host of other shades was massing around Sabit's winged spirit. A murmuring chorus of agreement arose from their throatless, mouthless, tongueless general vicinity. The former slave heard the faint sound of gold lozenges jingling in a melancholy manner, the ghosts of the fancy hats that many of Lord Gilgamesh's ill-starred household help had been given to wear into the tomb with him.

"Ibi-Sin? Is that you?" Namtar inquired. It was an off chance, but he simply had to confirm his suspicions.

"Yes, it's me," one of the other shades replied. It sounded miffed. "So this is how you come to join us, Namtar? Late as usual, and out of uniform; that always was your style."

"Ibi, we were slaves. We didn't *have* uniforms."

Namtar's arguments cut no mud bricks with his former superior. Old Ibi-Sin had always been a bit of a pedant in potter's clothing, a born lecturer who loved to hear himself hold forth. Death had in no wise affected this: "Whatever a person's career or calling, among civilized folk there are always certain *expectations* connected with it. A social contract, if you will. From the lowliest collector of night-soil to the Great King himself, we must do what our position requires of us, for that is what our fellow citizens anticipate we shall do. Even the gods must bow before the rule of anticipation, or we might as well go back to primordial chaos!"

"Look, it was that priest who took away my hat. Go blame *him* for single-handedly bringing back primordial chaos."

Ibi-Sin's shade pulled the same stunt as Sabit's, using his wing to throw an air-punch at Namtar, except there was nothing gentle or friendly about it. The wafted aether of the underworld smacked into the former slave's breadbasket with the force of a charging ram, knocking him onto his rump.

"Hey!" Namtar protested. "What was *that* for?" His vexation was short-lived, quickly replaced by a growing sense of alarm. Ibi-Sin and the rest of the shades surrounding him were giving off a distinct aura of malevolence. The waves of bitter resentment emanating from them were more tangible than they were. It didn't take a professional guts-reader to divine the cause.

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I'm alive and they're envious, Namtar thought. *Fair enough*. He stood up and began to back away. The menacing shades matched him, step for step, despite the fact that they lacked feet as well as faces.

Namtar felt the chill seed of panic take root in his belly. It was clear he'd made himself more than a score of enemies just by being alive when they were not. What would they do to him if he allowed himself to be overtaken? He'd heard that the dead had no power over the living, but was that simply another scrap of the priests' "wisdom," irrefutable because it was unverifiable? He'd *felt* it when Sabit and Ibi-Sin sent those air-punches his way. What would happen if the whole complement of Team Gilgamesh made a concerted effort and lobbed a volley of them at his unprotected hide? Namtar knew he'd find out if he let the shades get close enough, but he preferred not to end his life as a test case. He continued to retreat, never taking his eyes from the oncoming mass of angry shadows, until he bumped into something solid.

"Where do you think *you're* going, slave?" The voice at Namtar's back was not that of Inanna or Ereshkigal, unless the ladies had decided it would be good fun to become bass-baritones in order to mess with their worshippers' minds. Namtar turned his head and saw a being that was neither featureless shade nor gleaming god nor fleshly mortal like himself but a bit of all three. Below the neck, the insubstantial murk of an ordinary ghost had been given discernable form while from the neck up the apparition had a human face so perfectly preserved that Namtar had no trouble whatsoever in identifying it at once.

"Lord Gilgamesh!" he cried, automatically raising his hands in an attitude of homage that also came in handy for warding off blows.

The spirit laughed, and laughter made his whole being shine so that the encroaching darkness of the Land of Dust and Ashes was forced back. The intimidating crowd of shades that had been backing Namtar into a nonexistent corner also withdrew a little before the light. Only Sabit's soul, the solitary one in all that hostile mob that had not shared her fellows' anger and resentment, remained unmoved.

"Greetings, O Namtar!" The Great King's cheerful voice seemed to fill Ereshkigal's realm with its presence. "We missed you in the death pit. They sent along some other man in your place — a soldier, I think — but the priests already included more than enough soldiers and when it comes

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to making me a nice new set of clay drinking vessels, he's worse than useless."

"Er, yes, well...." Namtar rubbed the back of his head furiously. He didn't know which way to look for very shame. "What I mean to say is...can't Ibi-Sin handle that?"

Gilgamesh laughed again, and again light filled the underworld. "There, there, man, I'm only joking. Look around you! Do you see any taverns, any vintners? What use do I have for drinking vessels now? Or soldiers, harpers, huntsmen, or handmaidens, for that matter?" He shook his head. "Stupid priests. They got the mystic, sacred numbers bit right and not a damned thing besides. Not that I notice them filling any of the places in my tomb with even one of *their* boys."

Namtar decided that this might not be the best time to deliver that Ziqarru-sends-his-regards message from the priest of Enki. Instead he said, "You're, er, looking rather well for a man in your, um, present circumstances, O Great King."

Gilgamesh's face was somewhat more than flesh, his hand was somewhat less, yet when he rested that misty extremity on Namtar's shoulder, the former slave felt it. "We stand in a place where all former titles and honors mean nothing, Namtar. Here I am king of shadows, and shadows do not heed the words of kings. Here I am no more than Gilgamesh."

"Your pardon, O Great — O Gilgamesh, but the evidence of my eyes declares that you *are* something a good deal more than the rest of these shades. I mean, you've still got a face and all. And they *do* seem to be showing you an appreciable measure of deference."

"Oh, that?" Gilgamesh shrugged. "That would be the effect of the legends. My legends. They tend to add something to a person, something that clings to you even here. Not that it's going to do me any real good in the long run. Sure, I've got a face and I'm glowing with numinous energy like a supernatural baboon's bottom, but that and a disc of beaten silver will buy me a measure of wine. Which — did I mention? — doesn't exist down here."

Namtar did not see matters in quite the same light as the once-and-dead-now king. "If the legends that have arisen about your exploits lend you this glorious light, O Gilgamesh, and if this light can keep the

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common shades at bay until I'm safely gone, I will pour out a dozen measures of wine when I get home, see if I don't. I'd say *that's* worth something."

Gilgamesh shook his head. "That's worth a dozen wasted measures of wine and a small patch of damp earth. We spirits do not taste your mortal sacrifices. But I will still help you leave this place and return safely to Uruk. The goddess Inanna lied to you with all the powers of deceit that love and war have used since they were first created. My strength will fade as my legends do, but while I have that strength I will gladly use it to teach the bitch a lesson."

A shadow fell upon Gilgamesh and Namtar and all the shades that waited just beyond the dead king's radiance. Inanna and Ereshkigal loomed over them, arms folded, brows drawn together in a pair of matching scowls.

"I *told* you he was trouble," Ereshkigal said to her sister.

"Oh, pooh," said Inanna. "How much trouble can he be? He's still dead. If you give me permission to swap that mortal snippet for my beautiful soldier, what can the Great King of Nothing do about it?"

For answer, Ereshkigal waved her hand over the crowd of shades from Gilgamesh's tomb, summoning forth one of their number. She then reached up to her glittering headdress of gold and jewels, the great-grandpappy of all the jingly hats that had gone into the king's death pit. Removing a flawless lozenge of finest lapis lazuli, the stone of heaven, she gave it to her sister.

"Here," she said. "This talisman gives its bearer the power to convey from my realm any spirit she desires, so long as she provides another soul to take its place. The spirit that you remove shall be reincarnated as soon as it emerges from the underworld, and it shall repossess the same physical form it had before death." Seeing Inanna open her mouth, Ereshkigal hastened to add: "Not *right* before death. Don't worry, you won't get a man in the last throes of hemlock poisoning. He'll be as alive and healthy as you could desire, and I am extremely insulted that you would even *think* I'd pull such a sneaky trick. Do I *look* like a lawyer? There's the talisman, there's the potter, there's your soldier. Touch the talisman to the soldier, touch the potter with your free hand, and Humbaba's your uncle: It's done."

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Inanna didn't have to be told twice: She thrust the lapis talisman at the soldier's shade, glommed hold of Namtar before he could skedaddle, and chanted the esoteric invocation: "Come to Mama!"

Nothing happened.

Inanna tried it a second time, and a second time nothing happened, though somehow it managed to happen more emphatically. The goddess of love and war gave her sister the stink-eye, but while Ereshkigal looked innocent she also did not look all that surprised.

Taking back the lapis lozenge, the queen of the dead made a good show of shaking it violently, then setting it to her ear as though listening for something. "It's running," she said. "So there's only one reason why it didn't work for you." She pointed to where Namtar still stood backed up against the Great King of Uruk. "I *told* you that one was still trouble, dead or not. As long as the potter's cozied up to Gilgamesh, he shares in the king's heroic aura and it's gumming up the works. Stupid legends: They get all over everything they touch, like honey. To the talisman, the potter smells the same as a real hero, and so it won't let you swap him for an ordinary mortal like your soldier; it's not an even trade."

Inanna was not amused. She turned her full attention on Namtar and said, "This is your first and only warning: Put up your hands and step away from the hero."

And Namtar, with the same measure of cold, calm determination he'd exhibited much earlier that same day, shook his head slowly and replied: "So you can turn me into one of these unhappy shadows? With respect, O Radiant One, go intimately know yourself."

It is said that the ensuing standoff lasted many days. There is no truth to this, but it makes for a better story. Just as well, for Namtar was mortal and would not have been able to survive a days-long confrontation without food or water, whereas Inanna had all eternity to wait him out.

What actually happened was that Inanna, who did have all eternity, also had the attention span of a ferret. When her divine brand of bullying didn't work and the potter showed no signs of backing down and cooperating with her immediately, she frowned at him for about seven breaths, then flung down the lapis talisman and announced: "Bugger this. I'll find another soldier for my bed. They're cheap enough to come by." With that, she vanished.

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Ereshkigal chortled. "I thought she'd never leave." The queen of the dead patted Namtar on the head. "You are a wonder, little man. I like your nerve. Perhaps the aura of heroism surrounding you is all your own."

"Great Queen, you do me too much honor." Namtar held his hands high and bowed before Ereshkigal. "Never mistake stubbornness for valor. I am simply a man who knows that when Opportunity smiles, however shyly, you should spring upon her, carry her off, marry her, and leave her pregnant with your fourth child before even drawing breath to ask 'Are you sure you're smiling at *me*?'"

The goddess laughed, and for once it was laughter untouched by that enforced irony brought on by rubbing elbows with so many corpses. "I will not make that mistake in future, O mortal man!" she said, still grinning.

Namtar smiled back and even gave the queen of the dead a flirtatious wink before saying: "Also I beg of you, Great Queen, not to mistake the mark of my sex for the inborn ability to find the proper road without asking directions. How do I get out of here?"

The goddess knelt beside the potter and caressed him with one cool, brown hand. "Must you go so soon?" she crooned. "You vexed my sister *so* well; I like that in a man."

"You never liked that in *me*," Gilgamesh protested. "I defied Inanna too! Back when I was alive, she wanted to sleep with me, but I said no. Right to her face, I said it! She took a hideous vengeance for my defiance, but I confronted it boldly nonetheless and — "

Ereshkigal gave him a disdainful look. "She took that hideous vengeance on your best friend, Enkidu. It's *so* much easier to face the consequences of your actions when someone else's life pays the forfeit. Oh, you wept when he died, but I didn't notice you leaping into the grave with him. No, that was what set you off on your annoying little quest for the Flower of Immortality. You were scared of death, O Gilgamesh, absolutely terrified! If you gave poor Enkidu a second thought all the while you were desperately seeking to save your own life, I'll eat my hat! And trust me, when you're a goddess, lapis lazuli gives you gas."

Gilgamesh did not take any of this abuse lying down. He waded into the fray, calling Ereshkigal all manner of vile things, alternating these *ad deam* attacks with a spirited defense of his heroic record. Namtar found

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himself being edged away from the embroiled pair, ignored and sidelined once more. The trouble was, this time he knew that the sidelines teemed with the irate spirits of the dead from the Great King's tomb. If they renewed their hostile intentions, he'd be an air-battered lump of lifelessness long before Gilgamesh would notice. His best bet was to take shelter within the hero's legendary aura, but alas, Gilgamesh was one of those people who used their hands as readily as their tongues when caught up in the heat of an argument. The dead king of Uruk was gesturing to the four quarters of the underworld as he quarreled with Ereshkigal. Namtar understood that if he got too close while Gilgamesh was waving his arms around like that, the king might do with a single blow what the angry spirits would need all their concerted strength to accomplish.

Namtar knew a lose-lose situation when he saw one. "I'm never going to get out of here," he muttered. "Not alive. What's time to a goddess and a dead man? They'll argue on with never a thought for me until I perish of old age. This is all the fault of those stupid priests: They might as well have left me in line where I was. Much good their so-called mercy did me!" He kicked the soil of the Land of Darkness and Ashes viciously.

Something clinked against the tip of his sandal when he kicked it, something too large and solid to be ashes. Something went sailing through the air, a thing so vividly colored that its brilliant blue defied the all-encroaching darkness of Ereshkigal's realm. Namtar made a beautiful dive and caught the lapis talisman before it could hit the ground again. He stood up, brushed ashes from his front, and was about to inform Ereshkigal that she'd dropped something.

A filmy wing shot up before his face. Sabit's sweet voice sounded softly in his ear: "That is a very courteous thing to do, O Namtar," she said. "It is also very stupid."

The former slave looked into the apparition's featureless face, then down at the talisman in his hand. "Thank you, Sabit," he said. "I wouldn't want to do anything stupid. People might mistake me for a priest. Now would you be able to show me the way back home?"

Sabit's shade fairly shimmied with pleasure. "Walk this way, O Namtar." She began to drift away.

"If I could walk that way, I wouldn't need the — Oh, never mind." Namtar made haste to follow. The vengeful spirits from Lord Gilgamesh's

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tomb tried to intercept him, but the residual glory of the Great King's legend kept them at bay. The potter passed through their midst, offering these words in his wake: "Don't worry, friends! I shall return."

"Big deal," the shade of Ibi-Sin muttered. "So does everyone."

ZIQARRU, SENIOR PRIEST of Enki, was feeling well pleased with himself. He had just had an excellent supper and was looking forward to an evening stroll. He loved these solitary perambulations, for it gave him the chance to bask in his own self-satisfaction over a day well spent.

Today the senior priest had more than the usual reasons to take pride in his accomplishments: Lord Gilgamesh's funeral would be the talk of Uruk for days. It had been flawlessly executed, as had the thirty-two human sacrifices consigned to the pit with their late royal master. Yes, there had been that trivial incident involving one of the slaves and a young soldier who really should have known better, but since it had taken place at the very back of the procession, not too many people had even noticed it happening. The dignity and authority of the priesthood was intact; that was all that mattered. In keeping with that dignity and authority, Ziqarru donned a towering headdress of gold, carnelian, lapis, and jet before going out. It wouldn't do to have other casual strollers pass him by without knowing him for the great man he was.

Ziqarru was making his jingly way around the walls of Uruk when a man stepped out of the shadows and into his path. There was something familiar about him, though the priest soon dismissed this niggling feeling in favor of pique when this upstart bit of spear-fodder refused to move aside. Unaccustomed to such insolence, Ziqarru determined to exert the full authority of Enforced Religion in order to teach him his place.

"Make way, O Impudence!" the priest declared. "Make way, lest your obvious lack of respect toward a priest of Enki shall single-handedly cause the city-wide onset of plague, murrain, boils, leprosy, the Egyptian pox, and the fall of Uruk itself! It could happen."

The man merely smiled and reached behind him. Ziqarru stared: Was it his imagination, some trick of the failing light, or had the man's hand vanished into a patch of darkness that was somehow...*denser* than the oncoming dusk? Before the priest of Enki could determined the answer,

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the fellow stretched out his other hand and — O the effrontery! — grasped Ziqarru firmly by the wrist.

"Tell Lord Gilgamesh that Sabit and all the folks from the death pit say hello," the man said. With one last clink and tinkle from his fancy headdress, the priest vanished.

In his place, a pretty girl wearing finery fit for the royal palace now drew the first sweet breath of life renewed. She threw her arms around her deliverer, filling his ears with all manner of thanks and promises.

"No, no, think nothing of it, my pleasure, dear Sabit," Namtar said, disentangling himself reluctantly from her arms. "Now why don't you run along home to Puabi? I'll join you eventually, and I wouldn't say no to a nice jar of beer when I get there, but first things first: I've still got thirty-one more spirits waiting for me to swap them back to life, you know."

"But where will you find thirty-one replacement — ?" Sabit began.

Namtar turned a thoughtful gaze to where the great terraced temples of Uruk made their way skyward. "Oh, I'm sure I'll find them *somewhere*." He smiled. "And I'll even let them keep the hats."

Coming Attractions

Next month we'll bring you an unusual tale of riding the rails, courtesy of Richard Mueller. In "Dutch," he spins out a heartfelt story full of wisdom and experience. Don't miss this one.

It looks like our February issue will also bring us a new tale of Markovy, courtesy of R. Garcia y Robertson. In "Queen of the Balts," you'll meet Princess Annya, a character as strong and vivacious as any you're likely to meet between here and Estonia.

Our regular film reviewers had scheduling conflicts this time around, so we've asked David J. Skal to fill in—we should have his take on *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* in addition to our regular book columns.

And in our inventory, we've also got new stories by familiar names like Goulart, Di Filippo, Finlay, and Rickert, as well as some names you might not recognize, such as Hobson and O'Keefe. Subscribe now to make sure you'll get it all.

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Index to Volumes 106 & 107, January-December 2004

Abraham, Daniel:
Flat Diane (nvlt) ..... OcN 128
Alexander, Rob: *Cover for:*
"Fog" ..... Dec
Attanasio, A. A.:
Zero's Twin ..... Jun 44
Bacigalupi, Paolo:
The People of Sand
and Slag (nvlt) ..... Feb 6
Bailey, Dale:
The End of the World
as We Know It ..... OcN 70
Barnard, Bryn: *Cover for:*
"In Tibor's Cardboard Castle" ... OcN
Bash, Kent: *Cover for:*
"Stuck Inside of Mobile" ..... Jul
Beagle, Peter S.:
Quarry (nvlt) ..... May 125
Benford, Gregory:
A Scientist's Notebook ..... Jan
Bertolini, Max: *Cover for:*
"Faces" ..... Jun
Bishop, Michael:
The Angst of God ..... OcN 88
Cady, Jack:
Fog ..... Dec 8
Cambias, James L.:
The Ocean of the Blind (nvlt) Apr 7
Campbell, Aaron: *Cover for:*
"Quarry" ..... May
Cheney, Tom:
Cartoons.....Mar,Jul,OcN
Chwedyk, Richard:
In Tibor's
Cardboard Castle (nvlt) .. OcN 202
Competition #68 ..... Jun
Competition #69 ..... Dec
Cooke, John Peyton:
Serostatus (nvlt) ..... Jan 136
Cotham, Frank: *Cartoons* ..... Aug,
Cowdrey, Albert E.:
A Balance of Terror ..... Jun 105
The Name
of the Sphinx (nvlt) ..... Dec 100
The Tribes
of Bela (novella) ..... Aug 41
Rapper ..... Feb 41
Silent Echoes (nvlt) ..... Apr 90
de Lint, Charles:
Books to Look For ..... Jan–Dec
Denton, Bradley:
Sergeant Chip (novella) ... Sep 53
Di Filippo, Paul:
Curiosities ..... May,Sep,
Plumage from Pegasus.....Apr, Jun, Jul,
Doherty, Paul: *see: Pat Murphy*
Eggleton, Bob: *Cover for:*
"Invisible Kingdoms" ..... Feb
Emshwiller, Carol:
The Library ..... Aug 129
Ench, Cory and Catska: *Covers for:*
"Nimitseahpah" ..... Jan
"The Tribes of Bela" ..... Aug
Etchemendy, Nancy:
Nimitseahpah ..... Jan 8
Farris, Joseph:
Cartoons.....Feb,Apr,May,Jul,Aug,OcN
Fazi, Melanie:
The Masked City ..... May 72
Finch, Sheila:
Confessional ..... Jan 36
So Good a Day (nvlt) ..... May 38
Finlay, Charles Coleman:
After the Gaud
Chrysalis (nvlt) ..... Jun 122
Pervert ..... Mar 117
The Seal Hunter (nvlt) ..... Jan 97
Friesner, Esther M.:
Johnny Beansprout ..... Jul 119
Garcia y Robertson, R.:
Stuck Inside
of Mobile(novella) ..... Jul 53
Garland, Michael: *Cover for:*
"Sergeant Chip" ..... Sep
Gerrold, David:
Dancer in the Dark (nvlt) Apr 125
Goldstein, Lisa:
Finding Beauty (nvlt) ..... OcN 8
Gregory, Daryl:
Free, and Clear ..... Feb 70
The Continuing Adventures
of Rocket Boy (nvlt) ..... Jul 135
Guthridge, George:
Nine Whispered Opinions Regarding
the Alaskan Succession ... Jul 37
Haldeman, Joe:
Faces ..... Jun 62
Hand, Elizabeth:
Books.....Mar,Aug
Hardy, David A.: *Cover for:*
"Dancer in the Dark" ..... Apr
Harris, S.:
Cartoons.....Mar,Apr,May, Jun,Sep
Heath, Mark: *Cartoon* ..... Apr
Hughes, Matthew:
A Little Learning (nvlt).... Jun 5
Mastermindless (nvlt)..... Mar 7
Falberoth's Ruin..... Sep 99
Relics of the Thim ..... Aug 147
Irvine, Alex:
A Peaceable Man (nvlt) ... Mar 129
Peter Skilling ..... Sep 116
Jarpe, Matthew, and Jonathan Andrew Sheen:
The Bad Hamburger (novella)Dec 55
Jonik, John: *Cartoons* ..... OcN,Dec

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Kandel, Michael:
Time to Go ..... OcN 47
Kelly, James Patrick:
Serpent ..... May 117
Kessel, John:
Curiosities ..... Apr
Killheffer, Robert K.J.:
Books ..... Jan,Jun,OcN
Langford, David:
Curiosities ..... Feb,OcN
Lawrence, Jaye:
Kissing Frogs ..... May 65
Libling, Michael:
Christmas in the Catskills (nvlt) ..... Dec 135
Long, Bill: *Cartoons*...Feb,May, Aug,OcN
MacIntyre, F. Gwynplaine:
Curiosities ..... Mar
MacLeod, J. Annie:
Gasoline ..... Sep 130
Maio, Kathi:
Films ..... Jan,May,Jul,OcN
Masear, Arthur:
Cartoons ..... Feb,May,OcN,Dec
Mason, Kate:
The Millstone ..... Apr 72
McAllister, Bruce:
The Seventh Daughter ..... Apr 86
Miller, Ron: *Cover: "Antares"* ..... Mar
Morressy, John:
A Life in the Day of Eb and Flo: An American Epic ..... Jul 52
The Courtship of Kate O'Farrissey (nvlt) .... OcN 155
The Long Run ..... May 81
The Unpleasantness at le Château Malveillant (nvlt) ..... Apr 39
Walter and the Wonderful Watch ..... Dec 127
Mueller, Richard:
I Am the City ..... Sep 142
Jew If by Sea ..... May 94
Murphy, Pat, and Paul Doherty:
Science ..... Mar,OcN
Nix, Garth:
Heart's Desire ..... Jan 128
Porges, Arthur:
By the Light of Day ..... Jun 95
Reed, Kit:
The Zombie Prince ..... Jun 75
Reed, Robert:
Designing with Souls ..... Sep 39
How It Feels (nvlt) ..... May 8
Opal Ball ..... OcN 121
River of the Queen (nvlt) . Feb 126
The Condor's Green-Eyed Child (nvlt) ..... Aug 6
Rickert, M.:
Cold Fires ..... OcN 99
Many Voices ..... Mar 93
Rini, J. P.: *Cartoon* ..... Dec
Robertson, R. Garcia y: *See Garcia y Robertson, R.*
Rosenbaum, Benjamin:
Start the Clock ..... Aug 106
Sallis, James:
Books ..... Apr,Jul,Dec
Shanahan, Danny:
Cartoons ..... Mar,Apr,Jun,Jul,Sep
Shea, Michael:
The Growlimb (nvlt) ..... Jan 58
Sheckley, Robert:
The Forest on the Asteroid ..... Apr 62
Sheehan, Bill:
Curiosities ..... Dec
Sheen, Johnathan Andrew: *see Jarpe, Matthew.*
Shepard, Lucius:
Films ..... Feb, Apr, Jun, Aug, Sep, Dec
Stoddard, James:
The Battle of York (nvlt) .. Jul 5
Tiedemann, Mark W.:
Rain from Another Country ..... Sep 8
Tucker, George:
Welcome to Justice 2.0 .... Jan 55
Utley, Steven:
Invisible Kingdoms ..... Feb 59
A Paleozoic Palimpsest ... OcN 54
Van Gelder, Gordon:
Editorial ..... May,Jul
Van Hollander, Jason:
Curiosities ..... Aug
Van Scyoc, Sydney J.:
Virgin Wings ..... Dec 39
Vukcevich, Ray:
Gas ..... Apr 111
Glinky ..... Jun 98
Webster, Bud:
Curiosities ..... Jan, Jun,Jul
West, Michelle:
Musing on Books ..... Feb,May,Sep
Wilce, Ysabeau S.:
Metal More Attractive (nvlt) ..... Feb 88
Williamson, Chet:
The Pebbles of Sai-No-Kawara ..... Feb 117
Wolfe, Gene:
The Little Stranger (nvlt) ..... OcN 184
Young, Jim:
Ultraviolet Night (nvlt) ..... Mar 41

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CURIOSITIES

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS, ILLUSTRATED BY ALVIM CORRÊA (1906)

TODAY considered in Brazil as a pre-Modernist painter, sometimes mistaken for a Russian or Belgian, Henrique Alvim Corrêa was the first Brazilian science fiction artist. In 1892, as a teenager of sixteen, he moved to Europe. By then he was the stepson of Baron of Oliveira e Castro, a monarchist who fled the newly Republican Brazil. Belgium was the place he chose to establish himself as a war painter (and also an erotic artist, signing "Henri LeMort").

In 1903 Alvim Corrêa went to London in search of H. G. Wells, to ask for Wells's authorization for an edition of *The War of the Worlds* with his own artworks. His samples strongly impressed Wells, particularly for their hallucinatory, haunting qualities. Published in Belgium in 1906, that special edition — just five hundred copies in a French translation done by Henry Davrey — turned Alvim Corrêa into one of the best and less known early illustrators of Wells. At that time he was recovering from tuberculosis.

His twenty-three pencil-and-ink artworks for *The War of the Worlds* are seductive and shocking, moody and comic. His shadowy Martian war machines are given cartoon-like eyes that humanize them, while the artist de-humanized the attacked human crowds, depicted as ant-like, panic-ridden masses or zombie-like figures with erased physiognomies. His feverish images are simultaneously eerie, action-packed, intense and decadent, Gothic and erotic, sketchy and exquisite, pulpy and artistic in a single continuum of style. In all that Alvim Corrêa translated the modern angst of depersonalization and fear of technology through a fragmented and disillusioned approach. He died in 1910, at thirty-four.

— Roberto de Sousa Causo

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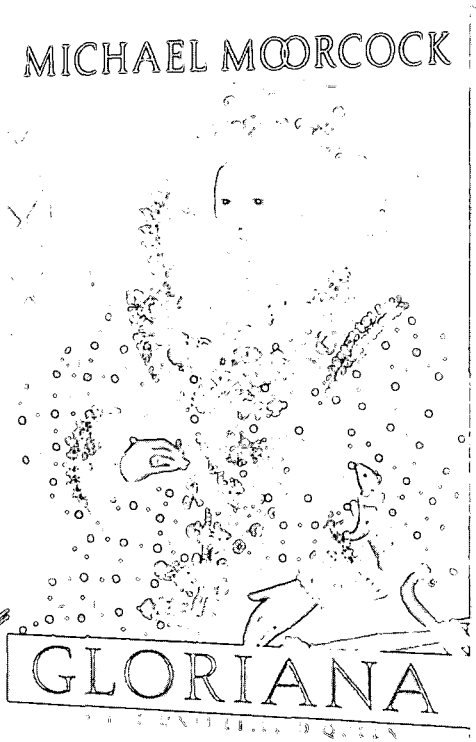

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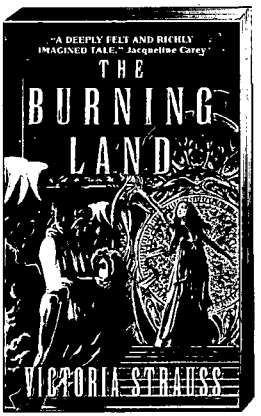

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